

An illustration of a young man and woman in traditional Japanese wedding attire (shimazuri). The woman is wearing a white headscarf (ho) and a white robe with gold trim, holding the man's hand. The man is also in a white robe with gold trim. They are positioned in front of a red curtain and a blue patterned background.

ETERNAL LOVE

永遠の愛を我が花嫁に

Written by

MIZUMI TAKAOKA

Illustrated by

YUKARIKO JISSOHJI



Yaoi

Novel

VISIT...

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Caliente.COM



"Everything will end today, and begin anew. Trust yourself to me."

Written By
Mizumi Takaoka
September 26-Libra
Blood Type O

I'm hoping for a relaxing 2007. I'll stay healthy and
meet all my deadlines...or at least I'll try.

Illustrated By
Yukariko Jissohji
February 19-Pisces
Blood Type A

My mother didn't raise me for the rough and tumble life
I'm leading now!

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English translation by
Translation By Design



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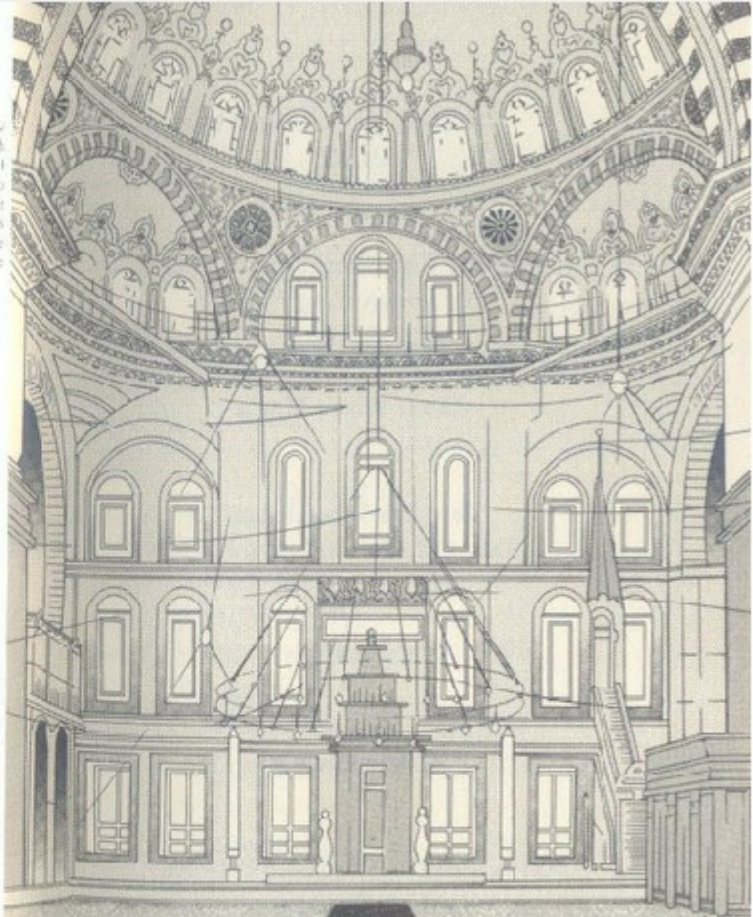
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Part 1: Eternal Love

Chapter One

Tomoyuki's eyes slowly opened, the lids as heavy as if they'd been glued together. A bright light flared inside his head and he blinked painfully.

He groaned. Where was he? What had happened?

Tomoyuki pressed his fingers to his temples and looked around at his surroundings, trying to piece together what was going on. It took his brain a moment to process what it was he saw.

He obviously wasn't in his hotel room, since the hotel bed didn't have a canopy. His eyes drifted from the gold and scarlet roses delicately embroidered overhead to the pure white satin curtains, whose golden fringe whispered beguilingly whenever it moved.

A blanket brushed his skin, it was of such superb quality and softness that he wished he could stay wrapped up in it forever. But a sweet scent caught his attention and, entranced, he followed it out of bed. He got his first good look at the room when he stood up. It took his breath away.

"I...I don't believe this," he whispered.

An elaborate pattern of interwoven flowers and leaves was sprawled across the ceiling of the room in a swirl of vermillion and cobalt blue. Magnificent

ceramics and sculptures were displayed on decoratively carved daises, too valuable for Tomoyuki to even guess at their prices. It was all so far beyond the experience of his ordinary life.

Expertly cut glass crystals had been inlaid on each of the pillars scattered across the room. And atop each had been set vases of marigolds. That seemed to be the source of the uniquely powerful fragrance.

A writing desk was set beside the room's window, two overstuffed easy chairs on either side of it. Tomoyuki tip-toed across the carpet that covered the floor to the window.

What he saw outside gave him another shock.

He caught sight of an extravagant fountain, spilling water over its edges in the center of an enormous garden, throwing up clouds of sparkling mist. The arrow-straight promenade running past it, bounded on both sides by lush date trees, and the cloudless sky above made for a glaring contrast.

But it wasn't the garden that caused Tomoyuki such dismay. It was what lay beyond the garden—*nothing*. Nothing interrupted the sweeping line of the horizon, nor the desert stretching out endlessly in all directions.

How did he get to a place like this? He searched his sluggish mind, trying to remember what had happened to him.

Tomoyuki worked for the planning department of a trading company. He had been on an emergency business trip to England upon the request of the international sales department of a subsidiary in that

country. The clients would be discussing the deal in English and Arabic, so they needed someone proficient in those two languages, someone they could trust. They'd picked Tomoyuki.

He had boarded a plane the day after he received the summons, so it was clear how urgent the deal was.

He didn't mind the flight, which was more than 10 hours long. He just relaxed, watching movies and reading, and in no time, he was in London.

He'd been told that someone from the sales department would be coming to meet him at the airport, and so he had waited at the lobby.

While waiting, a man had called out his name.

"Mr. Makabe?"

The man had shown Tomoyuki a company I.D. (his name was Lawrence), so Tomoyuki had followed him to a limousine. Tomoyuki had thought it odd that Lawrence had come to pick him up in such a nice car. He probably should have been more cautious, but at Lawrence's polite urging, he'd quietly slid into the back seat.

He never expected to see the man who was waiting inside.

The man had smiled at him, a champagne glass in one hand. "It's been too long," he'd greeted.

Tomoyuki had been overwhelmed. All he could do was gape.

"Aren't you going to say something?" the man had prompted.

Tomoyuki had remained silent.

"It's been six years," the man had said.

Astonished, confused, Tomoyuki had felt goosebumps prickling his skin under the man's direct stare. He tried to say the man's name, but he couldn't speak. He could only mouth one word: Why?

"I've come to get you, just as I promised faridat," the man had explained.

Tomoyuki had been mesmerized by the man's seductive smile.

The man had grabbed Tomoyuki's arms and pulled him close. By the time the approach of the man's lips had brought Tomoyuki back to his senses and he had begun to struggle, it had been too late.

A handkerchief had been pressed to his mouth and he'd been trapped under a sheet by a man's weight. He'd struggled to escape, but only briefly. His vision had clouded over and his mind had grown fuzzy, and then he'd blacked out.

Tomoyuki had no idea how much time had passed since his abduction. When he'd awoken, he had found not the England where he'd gone to negotiate a business deal, but a sultan's oasis in the desert. It was like he had teleported to some strange world.

But Tomoyuki recognized this place. He'd seen it on TV many times. This was Saria, an oasis in Madina, which was the richest of the United Ridwan Emirate nations. Its wealth included both its natural wonders and its national economy. Madina was one of the world's leading tourist destinations. It wouldn't be too far off the mark to claim that everyone in the world had seen Madina's landscape at least once, thanks to all the media coverage of the country.

"You haven't changed at all," Tomoyuki heard a voice say behind him.

He spun around. The speaker was the man behind it all, the one who'd brought Tomoyuki here. Tomoyuki wasn't sure how long the man had been standing in the doorway, one hand resting on the frame, watching him.

"...Aswil," Tomoyuki uttered the man's name at last.

Aswil's heroic eyes brightened. He took a step from the doorway and approached Tomoyuki. He stood at a slight distance, devouring Tomoyuki's body with his eyes. Uncomfortable, Tomoyuki drew back, and Aswil instantly caught his arm.

"Welcome to Madina, my home," Aswil said coolly.

Tomoyuki impatiently shook off Aswil's grip. He hadn't come here for a vacation. He was more interested in Aswil's reasons for doing this.

"You don't look well. How do you feel?" Aswil asked.

"Awful," Tomoyuki spat back, his lips drawn tight. As far as he was concerned, it was too late to accomplish anything now.

Aswil frowned. "Are you still feeling the effects of the drug?"

How was Tomoyuki supposed to keep control of his temper when Aswil was grabbing his chin and staring at him so intimately?

Aswil's hair was coffee brown, his eyes and skin the color of honey. The exotic features of his handsome

face hinted at his cunning. Tomoyuki glared furiously at Aswil, who was still peering at him through almond-shaped eyes. Aswil had always been a man justifiably proud of his looks, but his maturity had given him more dignity than when they had known each other before. Tomoyuki quailed just to face him now.

Aswil was dressed casually, but even so, no other man could have rivaled the elegance he achieved. His lips alone betrayed the doll-like impassivity of his face, stirring with vibrant life as they shaped Tomoyuki's name, only inches from the Japanese man's face.

"It was prescribed by a doctor," Aswil said, "so there shouldn't have been any side effects." His face clearly showed concern.

Tomoyuki wavered. He looked away, not wanting Aswil to know that the man had affected him.

"I'd like to know why you did this to me, out of nowhere," he said. His voice was as sharp as he could make it, but in reality, he felt as if his legs were going to collapse under him. He wanted to know why Aswil had drugged him and brought him to Madina without any explanation, although he didn't expect to be satisfied by any of the excuses he would hear.

"Why I did this? I already told you—because I promised I would," Aswil replied without the slightest hesitation.

Tomoyuki's eyelashes fluttered at the word "promise." It took all of his strength to hold back his emotions. "Promise? What promise?"

Good. He'd sounded calm.

Aswil's mouth twitched in a smirk. Who knew

what he was imagining.

"I thought you might say that," he said. "That's why I had to force you. I didn't want to, but you've always tended to keep people at a distance, once you decide you want to."

Tomoyuki glared at Aswil, resentment flooding through him. He was desperately trying to act reasonable, but the tiniest change in Aswil's expression set him off. He was in no mood to hear the man who had betrayed him talk as if they were the best of friends.

"Fine," he snapped. "I don't care what your reasons are, as long as you send me back to England right now. I was there on business. This is going to mess everything up."

"Oh yes." Aswil regarded Tomoyuki, his left eyebrow arched high. Tomoyuki was startled by the old familiar gesture. Aswil had always done that when he had something to say. "There won't be any problem as far as that goes. The talks were completely faked."

"Faked?"

Tomoyuki's resistance collapsed in the face of this completely unexpected response. What did that mean? Did Aswil mean that the negotiations had been invented simply to get Tomoyuki to come to England? He was sure that Aswil, careful as the man was, had also prepared a reason for why he hadn't contacted his office yet.

An unspeakable fury boiled up inside him. He didn't care about Aswil's reasons. They didn't matter anymore. Whatever excuses Aswil made, the man had still kidnapped him. And there was no justifying the fact

that Tomoyuki had to stay in Madina.

"Let me go home," he said. "I'm not going to go along with your whims, sheikh." He jerked his chin from Aswil's hand and pulled away. But Aswil didn't let him get away. Tomoyuki felt a large hand on the back of his neck and he was abruptly pulled back. "Aswil!"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Aswil's lips closed on it. Aswil's tongue penetrated his mouth, opened in protest, and traced over his teeth. He struggled, and another hand fastened onto his hip.

"Nng."

Tomoyuki pounded against Aswil's chest, but he knew there was little power in the strike. Just like old times, he was at the mercy of Aswil's searing kisses, smoldering with the heat of the desert.

Aswil's tongue tangled with Tomoyuki's own, as if trying to pacify the cowering creature, then ran along the roof of his mouth. Each time Aswil changed angles, the kisses became more intense, and their six years apart disappeared as if only a moment had passed.

Aswil was the only person who could bring Tomoyuki such sensuality and satisfaction with nothing but a kiss. It was like sex, all in just one kiss.

"Ah..."

His knees gave out. But Aswil's lips never lost contact with his. Aswil held Tomoyuki against him as the man's lips continued to consume the Japanese man.

Tomoyuki was light-headed by the time Aswil finally released him from the kiss, sucking one last time on his upper lip.

"My faridat," Aswil whispered.

That was what Aswil had called him before, too. Tomoyuki's body was already trembling with the desire Aswil had ignited, but those words rocked him to the core.

Faridat means "pearl" or "treasure" in Arabic. Six years before, it had been Aswil's pet name for Tomoyuki.

Tomoyuki scraped together the shreds of his reason that remained and pulled away from Aswil's hands, which had begun running up and down his back. He couldn't let himself be overwhelmed. He wasn't about to make the same mistake again.

"Tomoyuki," Aswil began.

"Let...let me go," Tomoyuki gasped.

He raised his right hand and whipped it at Aswil's cheek. The crisp sound echoed across the room. The moment Aswil's hold on him loosened, Tomoyuki took his chance to fix a look of utter contempt on his face.

Aswil touched his cheek with his fingers and snorted. "I didn't realize you hated me so much."

"Did you think I loved you?" Tomoyuki shot back, backing away from Aswil. His eyes were flinty as he announced, "I want to be alone."

It was torture being in the same room with Aswil right now. He wanted to be alone so he could think rationally.

But Aswil took no notice of his protest. "What will you do when you're alone? We're in the middle of the desert."

Tomoyuki glared pointedly at Aswil, furious at

being brushed off. He would have liked to ask exactly whose fault it was that he was in the middle of the desert.

"Unfortunately you have no choice but to stay here," Aswil said.

He reached his fingers out to Tomoyuki's brow, but the Japanese man turned his face away before Aswil could touch it.

"I don't care if this *is* an oasis," Tomoyuki said stubbornly. "I'd rather strand myself in the desert than stay with you."

"Tomoyuki." There was a hint of warning in Aswil's voice, as if he was scolding an unruly child. But he seemed to realize that Tomoyuki's feelings weren't going to change anytime soon and, sighing, he took a step back. "I'll come again tonight. Do all your thinking before then."

Tomoyuki didn't answer. He struggled not to look at Aswil or to relax his frown until the man had disappeared beyond the door. But as soon as the door shut and he was left alone, he was overcome by fatigue and he collapsed into one of the easy chairs. He loosened his tie and undid two buttons of his shirt, but he still couldn't catch his breath. He took several deep breaths, convinced that hot sand was sticking in his throat.

Aswil al-Murshid.

He'd met him seven years earlier, while studying abroad in England. He had been studying economics at Cambridge University when he met Aswil, who was



Aswil had always told Zafar that, and Tomoyuki had no doubt that Zafar intended to continue with that policy. Because the two of them had visited there, the country's attention was slowly beginning to focus on Ziyad.

Tomoyuki remembered what it had been like in Madina. Many things had happened, but once it was over it felt like it had all happened in a moment. But it had brought about a number of changes in his life. Without question, the biggest change of all was the man standing in front of him now.

He never would have imagined this result when he first came to Madina. No, it was still too early to call this an outcome. Everything was just beginning now.

The letter wrapped up with words were very characteristic of Aisha.

"I pray that you will think from time to time of your poor Aisha, who worries about you more than anyone else, no matter how far away you might be."

Tomoyuki folded the letter back up and handed it back. "We were very cruel to Aisha," he said.

A bitter smile came over Aswil's face, as if he acknowledged that, too.

"Why don't we have Aisha come out here one of these days?" he suggested. "The sooner the media and my relatives forget about me, the sooner I can do that."

Tomoyuki agreed.

Their life on the island was completely unrestricted and the inhabitants were all kind. Tomoyuki felt guilty—it was so peaceful. The fact that they were living together here, without interference from

anybody—the fact that something he had believed to be a dream had become reality—he was still reluctant to believe it. He couldn't shake the feeling that they should be facing some sort of karmic payback by now, or that Aswil would suddenly disappear again. He was still too wrapped up in what had happened six years ago.

"Oh..." A cool raindrop struck the tip of Tomoyuki's nose. "It's raining."

As he glanced up at the sky, rain fell in gentle pinpricks over his face. The sky had lost the last of its blue color and the sun was completely hidden by clouds.

"Let's go." Aswil took Tomoyuki's hand.

Tomoyuki stood up and, hands still twined, they ran toward their cottage.

Halfway back, Tomoyuki remembered the book he had been reading. He had set it aside on the table. "Oh, I forgot!"

"What?"

"My book."

He disentangled his hand from Aswil's and hurried back to pick up the book. He stuck it under his t-shirt so it wouldn't get wet and, at exactly that moment, the skies opened. Rain pounded the dock and started to flow across it like a river. He couldn't even hear Aswil's voice over the noise of it.

He ran back to where Aswil was standing and by the time they reached the cottage, they were both completely soaked.

"Ugh, how horrible."

Aswil laughed at Tomoyuki's pathetic tone of voice.

"It's not a big deal," the Japanese man added, glowering at Aswil for laughing at him. He took the book out from under his shirt and set it down on a chest. "Who cares if we get wet? It's not like we're going to melt."

He walked toward the bathroom. But after taking the first step, he couldn't go any further.

Aswil had taken hold of his wrist and pulled him back. Aswil looked at him defiantly and brushed away with cool fingertips the hair stuck to his neck.

"Take your clothes off here," Aswil said.

Tomoyuki searched for an answer, but not because he didn't know what to do. He gave a moment's thought to what to say, but Aswil expected an answer from him. He gazed down into Tomoyuki's eyes, silently urging him to be quick.

The Japanese man hesitated, fluttering his rain-soaked eyelashes. "What are you saying? The floor will get all wet."

But the floor was already wet. He didn't actually care.

Of course, Aswil knew that, and he gently shook his head. "I don't care if the floor gets wet. I'm thinking about that t-shirt clinging to your wet body."

Tomoyuki's eyebrows knitted together unconsciously, out of embarrassment.

The wet t-shirt sticking to his skin had just felt uncomfortable, but Aswil's words caused a different sensation to grow inside him. He realized that his t-shirt had become transparent and that Aswil was not unaware of his chest peeking through it.

Aswil gazed with narrowed eyes as Tomoyuki shivered. "Take off your clothes. Or would you rather I take them off for you?"

Take them off himself, or have Aswil strip him? If his clothes were going to come off here, he preferred to take them off himself. Tomoyuki felt heat gathering at the base of his neck as he took hold of the hem of his t-shirt. He slipped it over his head efficiently and dropped it on the floor. When he paused, Aswil's eyes pushed him to continue. He pulled his pants and underwear off together, almost desperately. When his legs were free, he threw the clothes at Aswil. The man caught them in one hand and gestured Tomoyuki over with the other.

Tomoyuki shook his head. He'd obeyed so far, so now it was Aswil's turn.

Aswil watched Tomoyuki, standing unmoving in the same spot, then moved over to him himself. He stopped within a few inches away and, deliberately not meeting Tomoyuki's eyes, let his gaze fall from Tomoyuki's throat down to his chest. To his solar plexus, then his stomach. Heat blossomed wherever Aswil's eyes landed and Tomoyuki took a deep breath.

It was hard to stay composed. But he didn't want to make the first move, so he bravely rode it out.

The heat drifted to the center of his body, his thighs, then his knees and down to his feet. When Aswil's gaze had roamed over his entire body, it returned to the center.

Tomoyuki's heart thudded as Aswil's palm brushed his chest.

"You're warm," Aswil murmured. A smile

played at the corners of his mouth. "I know you said that we wouldn't melt, but you seem pretty close right now."

A small cry escaped Tomoyuki. He quickly stifled it, but it was useless. Shivers were running down his spine as Aswil stroked his chest and pressed kisses against the flesh of his neck.

"Can I help you get rid of all this heat?" Aswil whispered.

"...Ah!" Tomoyuki cried out.

Aswil began to nibble at his earlobe and Tomoyuki threw himself against Aswil's chest. He tried to push himself away again immediately, but before he could, two strong arms closed around him.

Aswil caressed Tomoyuki's damp body. His lips brushed Tomoyuki's shoulders and his large hands ran over Tomoyuki's skin. His fingers trailed across Tomoyuki's back and grabbed his hips, and Tomoyuki couldn't resist anymore. He wrapped his arms around Aswil.

"Aswil..."

Their tongues entwined, drinking in each other's breaths, and they fell tangled together onto their fur rug.

Aswil took off his clothes with Tomoyuki's eager help. They sought out each other's nakedness with an impatience that flared up every second.

"Aswil..."

Tomoyuki was on top, running his tongue over Aswil's body. He slid from Aswil's firm chest to his taut stomach, arriving at Aswil's manhood, which rose up

for him. Wrapping his hand around its length, Tomoyuki kissed its tip. Aswil's organ twitched in response, swelling as he watched. Filled with love, he used every technique he knew. He licked carefully from the tip down to the base, and then slowly pulled Aswil into his mouth with his tongue.

"Tomoyuki..."

Aswil's breath came faster. His stomach heaved and he tightened his hand in Tomoyuki's hair. The act of serving Aswil's desires excited Tomoyuki, too. As he continued to work his mouth over Aswil, Tomoyuki began rubbing against the inside of Aswil's thighs without realizing it.

"Mm, mm..."

Stroking the base of Aswil's penis with his fingers, Tomoyuki bobbed his head up and down. He could feel Aswil pulsing inside his mouth, as if Aswil would explode at any second. Aswil's hands slid down Tomoyuki's back as Tomoyuki lost himself in the pleasure of giving pleasure to Aswil.

"Ungh!"

Aswil's finger suddenly darted between Tomoyuki's butt cheeks, and he jumped. Aswil brushed his fingers over the opening.

"Wait..."

Ignoring Tomoyuki's attempt to hold him back, Aswil plunged his slick fingers inside. Tomoyuki couldn't concentrate on tending to Aswil while he was being shallowly explored. He pressed his cheek against Aswil's organ and focused on the fingers penetrating his body.

Plunging in and out, rubbing against his inner walls, a sweet, throbbing pain swelled up inside him.

"Ooh..."

"I want to hear you. Let it overwhelm you."

Aswil whispered next to his ear, and a shiver ran over Tomoyuki's skin. Aswil's fingers had been preparing him, and now they began drawing out the pleasure inside him with a new movement.

He couldn't resist Aswil, who knew his body so well. Tomoyuki gripped the fur and surrendered his body to the pulsing pleasure.

Aswil pulled his fingers out. Tomoyuki closed tight again, lost in his oblivion, and Aswil let out a sigh. His honey-colored eyes were wet with desire.

Tomoyuki lay on his back, invitingly. Aswil rested his hands on Tomoyuki's knees and spread his legs wide. Tomoyuki felt Aswil's eyes on him and his legs trembled under the embarrassment he felt, but even more so out of anticipation.

"Tomoyuki."

Warmth flooded his opening. Tomoyuki let out a sigh and Aswil pushed inside, not missing his cue. Aswil spread him open as he pushed inside, making it impossible for Tomoyuki to hold onto him.

"Ah...ngh...Aswil..."

"It's okay. Just stay still."

"Ungh!"

It was only at the very beginning that Tomoyuki felt any pain. Once he'd been fully opened, Tomoyuki's inner walls clung to Aswil instinctively as he burrowed deeper.

Tomoyuki threw his head back at the pleasure, and the pressure, of being slickly penetrated. Aswil pulled Tomoyuki's hips closer to him as his chest heaved, panting.

A voice stained with pleasure dripped out of Tomoyuki as the pressure built up deep inside him. "Ohh."

Once he began to feel pleasure inside him, it only grew more intense the longer it went on.

"Tomoyuki...it's so great being inside you."

Aswil held his hips firmly in place, battering against them. Tears came naturally to Tomoyuki's eyes as Aswil rubbed against his inner walls and stimulated the erogenous zone inside him. Aswil bent over him and placed a kiss on his temple. He licked away a tear, and a cry caught in Tomoyuki's throat at the touch.

"Ah...ah...yesss."

Tomoyuki's back left the rug as he writhed under Aswil. As their connection deepened, he wept at the intensity of the pleasure. He wrapped his arms tightly around Aswil's waist and kissed him. His mind went blank and his entire body was filled with the sensation that every part of him was connected to Aswil.

"Ahh! It's coming!"

Tomoyuki began pushing back with his hips, devouring Aswil the way he liked it. The feeling that he wanted this to last even just a moment longer battled with his desire to reach his limit as quickly as possible.

"Aswil..."

Aswil wrapped his hand around Tomoyuki's penis.

"N...not yet...no!"

The reaction was immediate as Tomoyuki threw his head back in climax.

"Tomoyuki..."

"Hunh..."

He closed tightly around Aswil. Aswil thrust even more viciously against Tomoyuki's trembling insides. Tomoyuki couldn't even speak any longer, he could only let things happen to him. Aswil kissed him fiercely and pushed against Tomoyuki's limits.

Aswil grunted. The inside of Tomoyuki's body was seared by the passion spilling out of Aswil's strongly pulsing member. Tomoyuki was pushed to new heights. His body pulled itself into a lithe arc.

Aswil held Tomoyuki in his arms as he rolled onto the rug. He stroked Tomoyuki's hair and pressed kisses onto his cheeks and eyelids.

"That was amazingly good," Aswil gasped.

It was a long time before Tomoyuki could respond. His heart and body had been ravaged and he didn't want to move so much as a finger. He loved sex with Aswil, but it was even better after they'd finished. He could feel the tenderness mounting within them after their bodies had been pressed together in their own personal dream.

"I love you, my faridat."

Tomoyuki felt warmth spreading through his body, his heart smoldering with his love for Aswil.

Tomoyuki lay beside Aswil in bed, peering at

the screen as Aswil typed.

After they had moved from the rug to the bedroom, they had dozed off. When Tomoyuki had woken up, Aswil was already up and using the computer. He was looking at data on mining areas in Africa that he had purchased. He had to analyze the soil strata to see if it was possible to extract crude oil from certain mines.

Ever since they'd come to the island, Aswil had been analyzing data like this while he corresponded by e-mail with a partner company in England.

Of course, the fact that the oil company was dealing with the former king of Madina was a top secret subject.

The fake business trip Aswil had originally sent Tomoyuki on was now real. This time, Tomoyuki would be loaned to the oil company for the bidding process in order to cover for Aswil.

"Have you decided which mines you want to bid on?" Tomoyuki asked.

"More or less. But we have to hear what the other party has to say, too," Aswil replied.

Tomoyuki nodded as Aswil pointed to one of the maps on the screen. The oil company had named three candidate mines for initial bidding. The mine Aswil was pointing at was one of them.

Tomoyuki was sure that they would agree to the location Aswil wanted, without any problems, but the hard part would be deciding on what percentage of the shares their company would receive. Tomoyuki would probably discuss it directly with the oil company's representative when he went to England.

"Leave the negotiations to me. I'm not half bad," he said.

He pressed against Aswil and Aswil took him in his arms.

"I know how good a businessman you are," Aswil said.

Tomoyuki didn't feel too bad accepting the praise along with a kiss on the temple. When he'd been working in Japan, he'd been forced to take over a number of doomed projects and had made them succeed. He fancied himself a decent businessman.

He lay his own hand over Aswil's. "Mister Murshid."

Aswil looked at him, surprised. "Why the formality all of a sudden?"

"The thing is..." He felt a little nervous and chose his words carefully before proceeding. "I would be honored if you chose me to be your partner both officially and privately. To have and to hold."

Aswil raised an eyebrow. "I was going to."

"Aswil..."

It was almost anticlimactic how easily Aswil had accepted Tomoyuki's proposal, but hearing the man say it made his heart flutter with joy.

Tomoyuki tried to imagine his life after this, with the man who would be not only his lover, but also his business partner. The path he would walk with Aswil probably wasn't going to be smooth, but it would definitely be incredible. No matter what obstacles they faced, they would be able to overcome them together.

"I look forward to working with you," Tomoyuki

said in the formal Japanese style.

Aswil played along, bowing his head and replying, "I'm lucky to have you."

Then they caught each other's eyes and burst out laughing. They laughed loudly and fell onto each other.

Tomoyuki gave Aswil, his lover, a kiss and his heart fluttered sweetly.

There couldn't be anything better in the entire world than kissing the only man he loved, the man who loved him back.

Afterword

Hello, it's me, Takaoka. It's been a while since I wrote anything for SHY Novels, but here I am again with an Arabian tale!

I was completely enamored by the Harlequin sheiks, so when my editor asked if I'd be interested in doing something Arabian, I jumped at the chance.

But there are a lot of harsh obstacles for Arabian-type stories. I did my share of work here!

Whenever I write, a lot of questions come to mind, like why are these particular people doing these particular things? I get so mixed up that it turns out like a grade school student's story—a first grader's, even. But seriously...

Even when I was busy doing other things, Arabian images were always in a corner of my mind. For two months, maybe. I think I understand now what it means to think about something "night and day."

So now I have a huge sense of accomplishment. You could say I feel like I've climbed Mount Fuji and seen the sunrise—I feel totally refreshed.

But I think my editor worked even harder than I did! Words can't express how much help she gave me. I'm really sorry for being so helpless! I hope she'll keep putting up with me.

Next a few words for Ms. Jissohji, who took charge of the illustrations. I was so happy that she could draw the Arabian setting. I'm sure you readers feel the same way! I gasped when I saw how beautifully the cover was done. Thank you, Ms. Jissohji, for giving us such great art even though you're so busy!

And thank you to all you readers out there who picked this book up, too. Considering the work I did on this, I'm even more nervous than usual. I hope you enjoy it a little—that would make me so happy.

I'll keep working hard in 2007, so please think good thoughts of me!

That's all for now.

Mizumi Takaoka

Every Boss Needs A
HARD
worker

CAGED SLAVE
籠の中の奴隷
A Novel

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enrolled in the same department.

Aswil's elegance and dignity had always put him at the center of attention. His frighteningly handsome, exotic features were somehow unlike those of the typical Middle Eastern face, and it was rumored that he came from mixed blood. He was supposed to be the son of an oil baron, or the son of a hotel king, or the sheikh of an ancient tribe. There were rumors that there were bodyguards around the campus even when he wasn't there, and on and on. Every imaginable story had had its advocate.

No one knew anything for certain except that he was a citizen of the United Ridwan Emirates, but that didn't dampen the interest everyone showed in him. He continued to be an object of envy and desire. Tomoyuki was no exception, always watching him from afar.

They might have been in the same department, but their social positions and points of view were worlds apart. Normally, nothing would have ever given them reason to speak to each other.

But one evening, everything changed.

Rain had been pouring down in sheets for hours and Tomoyuki was looking for shelter when a black car stopped in front of him. The window at the back rolled down and Tomoyuki was shocked by whom he saw before him.

—*Mr. Makabe.*

He was even more shocked that the legendary Aswil al-Murshid knew his name. He was sure he looked like a total idiot, staring at the man.

Aswil granted Tomoyuki a glimpse of the smile

that was said to have charmed women the world over.

—*Let me take you home. You'll get wet.*

Tomoyuki declined the offer immediately.

—*That's all right!*

He didn't have the courage to share a ride in a chauffeured luxury car. And besides, it would only take five minutes to get to his dorm if he ran.

But Aswil got out of the car and stood in front of Tomoyuki, oblivious to the rain. Then he took Tomoyuki's hand and led him to the car, as if he was escorting a lady. Confronted by Aswil's gentle gaze, his eyes hiding a hint of passion, Tomoyuki couldn't possibly refuse. He slid into the car, feeling like he was floating on a cloud.

It took one week for "Mr. Makabe" to become "Tomoyuki." Another month for Tomoyuki to realize that he harbored homosexual feelings for Aswil. And six months after that, when Tomoyuki's swelling emotions had refused to subside, he finally screwed up his courage to confess to Aswil. He finally risked Aswil's scorn and the loss of a dear friend, which he had feared too much to act, until then.

—*We can't see each other anymore. I don't think of you as a friend anymore.*

They were in Aswil's room when Tomoyuki confessed. Aswil wrapped his right arm around Tomoyuki and pulled his friend toward him.

—*Don't you want to hear my answer?*

Aswil showed no surprise, just smiled.

—*No.*

Tomoyuki turned his face away, lips drawn

tight. Really, he was so nervous he felt his heart would leap out of his throat.

—What if I told you that I won't let you leave until you hear it?

He hadn't thought Aswil would be that cruel. It had taken so much courage to confess in the first place that Tomoyuki couldn't stand to be embarrassed even more. He would be lying if he said he didn't hold out some hope that Aswil would stay with him, but he would never have admitted it.

Aswil smiled at Tomoyuki's silence.

—There's no helping it.

Aswil wrapped his other arm around Tomoyuki.

—I feel the same.

So that was what people meant when they talked about being on cloud nine. Fueled by the passion in Aswil's words and body, the days after were like living in a dream. Aswil couldn't have been kinder. There was a forceful side to his personality, but Tomoyuki found even that deeply seductive. He gave no thought to what lay ahead of them. Aswil filled his mind and heart, always occupied his thoughts.

But one day, exactly a year after they'd met, Aswil suddenly returned to his country. That was when Tomoyuki first found out that he was from Madina.

—When things calm down, I'll call you. I'll come back for you.

Aswil's words had been brief, but Tomoyuki had believed them then. He'd wanted to believe them. Nothing mattered except escaping the anxiety that had

hung over him, threatening like a dark cloud.

But it didn't take long to realize that he had been right to worry. Tomoyuki saw on the news that the king of Madina was bedridden and that Aswil had taken on the role of regent. The news that Aswil was the king's only son and heir to the throne came as a shock. And because his mother had been English, he was now the object of world interest—the first king of his country to have foreign blood.

Just as Tomoyuki had recovered from the shock of that, he heard news of Aswil's engagement. He couldn't find the words to describe his feelings at that time. The news had devastated him. But somewhere inside himself, he'd decided that the engagement was inevitable, and he had given up. He couldn't keep hoping for a happy ending to his relationship with Aswil. Dreams were exactly that, after all—only dreams; and he'd just woken up. He'd felt another, completely aloof Tomoyuki inside himself, watching the Tomoyuki who was so sad.

After that, Tomoyuki never had another relationship. As a result, his grades became excellent and he'd gone back to Japan to graduate at the top of his class. He'd spent the last four years at one of the top companies in Japan. He worked manically, and, as a result, stood above the rest. His performance caught the eyes of his superiors.

He could trust his work. He liked that the results appeared in clear, numerical values. And Tomoyuki's work this time had been to hear the proposal for a contract from a certain British oil company, which was

seeking sponsors for a crude oil drilling project.

Aswil couldn't possibly have arranged all that.

"What does he want with me now?" Tomoyuki groaned.

He couldn't help feeling hostile. After six long years, he'd begun to think that Aswil had finally forgotten him, so what did the man want now?

He thought about how Aswil was now. Tomoyuki was accustomed to the man's charms, his sophisticated behavior. His fiery gaze.

Aswil's kisses were exactly as they had been, so passionate that he felt he was being burned somewhere deep inside his body. His fingers brushed his lips. They were still tender, even aching. He felt it was wrong, but all he could think about was Aswil.

He must not have been in his right mind since it was several moments before he noticed that someone was knocking on his door. Tomoyuki shook the thoughts from his mind and stood up.

He drew closer to the door, cautious of the hesitant knock. "Who is it?" he called out.

A woman's voice answered in polite Arabic. When he opened the door, a woman wrapped in a black abaya smiled at Tomoyuki.

"My name is Sana," she said, "and I will be serving you during your stay here. Please tell me if there's anything that you need."

Arabian women usually cover everything but their faces. He could tell that Sana was about 30. Her

features were typical of an Arabian woman's, but her black eyes were striking.

It would have been much easier to tell her that he didn't need any help and shut the door, but Tomoyuki knew that that wasn't really acceptable. This was Madina. If Tomoyuki refused her, Sana would not be fulfilling the duty her master had given her.

"I had food prepared for you," she said politely. "I will lead you to the dining room."

He realized for the first time that he hadn't eaten so much as a crumb in a very long time. But he wasn't feeling hungry. He had no idea if it was a side effect of the drugs or if he just wasn't feeling well because of the stress.

"I'd rather not," he said.

"Shall I have the food brought here instead?" Sana inquired.

"No," he said, refusing her second attempt. "I'm afraid I'm not up to it. I'm going to lie down. Please don't go to any trouble for me."

"But...his majesty asked me to prepare quite a lot of food for you," Sana protested.

It bothered her not to be able to carry out orders. Tomoyuki wasn't sure what he could do to help, but then an idea came to him. He still didn't feel like eating, but he did want to wash himself. "Can you take me to a bath?"

Sana's face lit up at Tomoyuki's request. "Certainly."

No sooner had she replied than she rushed out of the room on light feet. A different maid arrived to escort Tomoyuki.

"Please follow me," the new maid said.

He left the room and followed the maid through the Saria palace. The palace may have been a secondary residence tucked away in an oasis, but it was still shockingly extravagant. The architects seemed to have exhausted the limits of luxury, from the marble beneath their feet to the pillars covered in finely worked tiles. The large inlaid stones looked like emeralds. A mural of densely painted plant life that arched across the vaulted ceiling was a highlight.

The fact that he was in Madina, in the Middle East, finally registered for Tomoyuki. He was impossibly far from England, not to mention Japan.

"Here we are," the maid announced.

A pair of double doors swung open and Tomoyuki gaped at the sprawling bathing area he saw through the billowing clouds of steam. Round pillars were spaced evenly around the room, and in between them short flights of stairs descended into a round bathtub the size of a pool. In the center of the pool was a statue of a lion, hot water pouring out of its roaring mouth.

Three maids were waiting inside. The moment Tomoyuki hesitantly stepped into the room, they surrounded him and started stripping his clothes off.

"Hey...hold on!" he shouted in Japanese, surprising the women.

He spread his hands wide in apology, since they had, after all, done nothing wrong. "I'm sorry. But I'd prefer to do this myself," he said apologetically.

Their confusion was infectious. In Madina, he

knew it was probably customary for maids to help with bathing, but Tomoyuki simply could not submit to that. He had no idea how to tell them this, so he just asked to be left to bathe alone.

He wasn't sure how they took that. But it was important that he be alone here, and he felt greatly relieved when the maids left the room.

Tomoyuki felt a little guilty for having the huge bathtub all to himself. That thought made him realize how much of a commoner he was. His family had been part of the upper-middle class in Japan. It may even have been on the lower edge of the upper class. But no matter how wealthy he was in Japan, it was nothing compared to the royalty of Madina.

He stretched out in a corner of the marble bath and closed his eyes. A faint scent of roses floated up from the water and he began to relax, despite his situation. He'd heard that in olden times, there were faucets in the palaces of some countries that ran with rose-scented water. That people washed their hands with it. This was like the upgraded bathtub version.

Everything here seemed to belong to a world beyond all imagination. But this was how Aswil lived everyday. Even if it seemed unreal to Tomoyuki, it was just a part of humdrum life for Aswil. Tomoyuki let out a sigh.

After he'd taken a leisurely soak in the bath, he washed his body and hair. He returned for another long soak afterwards, but had to cut it short when he started to get dizzy.

He climbed the steps and returned to the

dressing area. The cool feeling of the marble on the soles of his feet was wonderful, and for a moment, he forgot his fatigue.

Several little bottles set to one side of his change of clothes caught his eye. They seemed like something the girls at his office would like, little glass bottles decorated with delicate roses. They were filled with amber liquid.

He opened the top of one and brought it to his nose. It smelled like a sweet perfume. It was no doubt intended to be put on the body. It didn't interest him. He replaced the cap, shrugging his shoulders, and, a bit edgy, slipped into the clothes that had been prepared for him. The silk nightgown caressed his skin wonderfully. But he thought it looked like lingerie and he felt uncomfortable. He didn't like clothes that went all the way to his feet.

It was nothing like a pair of pajamas. Arab countries and Japan, Aswil and Tomoyuki—they shared nothing in common. Fastening the buttons on the front, Tomoyuki had trouble deciding between a rattan chair and the bed, but wound up choosing the chair. He threw his glowing body into it and closed his eyes.

Aswil's face floated up in his mind.

—*Faridat.*

Aswil had called out to Tomoyuki in the same voice as long ago. An imperious, sweet voice suffused with affection. There had been a time when just hearing that voice had made Tomoyuki happier than he could say.

He lost himself in the memory of Aswil's

hand stroking his hair.

"Aswil..."

For Tomoyuki, that was a special name. Until that day six years ago, anyway. Ironically, Tomoyuki got to know the real Aswil only after the man had left. He had been deeply troubled by the differences between the Aswil in his heart and Aswil al-Murshid. He couldn't deal with it, and so erasing the Aswil in his heart had been the only way to protect his self-respect.

He thought he'd succeeded—until today.

He remembered the light touch on the back of his neck. He had loved being touched by Aswil. When Aswil touched the back of his neck, a kiss was sure to follow...

Tomoyuki snapped his eyes open. He saw Aswil looking down at him, cloaked in a masculine allure, touching the back of his neck with cool fingertips.

"I liked the way you said my name, in your dreams," Aswil whispered intensely, his eyes flashing.

Tomoyuki felt as if Aswil had pecked into his soul. He roughly slapped Aswil's hand away. Scowling unpleasantly, he rose from his chair. But before he could get away, Aswil grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"I hear you dismissed the maids," Aswil said.

"Is there a problem with that?" Tomoyuki shot back. He needed to calm down. He didn't want Aswil to know that the man had the power to upset him. "I don't need help taking a bath. Besides, it's embarrassing."

"Embarrassing, huh?" Aswil stared at Tomoyuki, so close that their noses almost touched, and snorted. "Is that your excuse, after the way you threw yourself at me?"

Tomoyuki knew if he got upset he would be playing right into Aswil's hands, but he was clearly shaken. He could imagine what Aswil was thinking about right now. Now that they were no longer together, he wanted to forget about the things they'd done when they had been happy together.

"Say my name again," Aswil whispered.

Tomoyuki's face went red and he bit his lips against any response. He didn't want to obey Aswil.

"Faridat."

He resolutely ignored his chaotic emotions and turned his eyes away to signal his refusal. He pretended that he had forgotten that old name. He must have upset Aswil because the man took hold of Tomoyuki's chin and turned Tomoyuki back to face him.

"You will not defy me in my own palace," Aswil ordered.

What an arrogant thing to say. It wasn't as if Tomoyuki had come here by choice. Since he was forced to face Aswil, Tomoyuki glared at the other man defiantly.

"So if the sheikh of Madina orders it, I must obey?" he asked with venom. "That just makes me even more curious as to what the sheik wants with a commoner like me."

As his voice rose in anger, one corner of Aswil's lips twitched up ironically.

"I thought I told you it was to fulfill my promise?" Aswil said.

"Are you not satisfied with one bride, then? I'm sorry, but I don't have time to participate in your

little jokes," Tomoyuki snapped.

"This isn't a joke," Aswil retorted.

Tomoyuki smiled with as much disdain as he could muster. It seemed that they were not talking about the same thing. "Well, it's a six-year-old punch line."

The regrets and wounds of the past had become a citadel for Tomoyuki. He hated what a fool he had been, and he hated Aswil for giving him no explanations. Although when it came right down to it, Aswil apparently didn't consider him worthy of an explanation.

"Punch line?" The smile disappeared from Aswil's face. He looked Tomoyuki over coldly and, still holding the Japanese man's chin firmly, brought his lips closer.

Resisting instinctively, Tomoyuki jerked his head back and fell into the chair. Aswil pushed him down against the chair, holding his head with his left hand and kissing him fiercely. Tilting the Japanese man's face left and right, he forced Tomoyuki's mouth open and thrust in his tongue.

Tomoyuki's hands trembled, clutching Aswil's button-down shirt. He should have resisted this, but before he realized it, he was clinging to Aswil. His breath quickened.

Aswil slid his hand down from the back of Tomoyuki's head to grip his neck.

A shock went down Tomoyuki's spine, lighting a fire deep inside him.

Aswil pulled Tomoyuki closer and his hand slipped down from the Japanese man's neck. It ran down the back of the nightgown, pressing against the spine

through the fabric, and Tomoyuki moaned softly.

He was shocked to hear his voice dripping with desire.

"No...I don't want this," he gasped.

Aswil stared at Tomoyuki, eyes aflame, his tongue crawling inside the Japanese man's mouth. "We need to do this now, for us," he managed to say.

"Don't be stupid...hey!"

Tomoyuki jumped as Aswil fondled his tail bone.

Pinning Tomoyuki in the chair, Aswil rolled up the bottom of Tomoyuki's nightgown, exposing first his knees, then his thighs.

A hand slipped in between his thighs and Tomoyuki squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't resist. Some part of his mind still refused to accept Aswil, but his body only trembled. Resistance was of no use at all.

"Your skin is like porcelain," Aswil murmured.

"Mm..." was all Tomoyuki could utter.

The pleasure that had once made his head spin re-awakened inside him at Aswil's touch. He had lived a life of self-denial for too long. He had begun to feel like a monk, but he knew, in Aswil's arms, that he had been wrong.

"Aswil..." Fingers were trailing over the joints of Tomoyuki's legs, making his eyes water. But still, he tried to pull himself back together, and time and again he told himself it was impossible. "No...let go..."

Aswil frowned at the refusal. "You're stubborn, aren't you?"

He pulled Tomoyuki's hips up, lifting him from

the chair. He was violent with his strength, and they fell face-down on the marble floor.

Tomoyuki tried to push himself back up, but it was too late.

Aswil pushed the Japanese man down with his weight. He pulled off his own necktie and bound both of Tomoyuki's wrists with it.

Tomoyuki finally realized how serious Aswil was.

"I'll never forgive you for this!" he screamed.

Aswil had a fiancée. But he was going to take what he wanted from Tomoyuki, anyway. He must think that anything he wanted was his for the taking.

What was Tomoyuki going to do?

"Stop!" he yelled.

He didn't understand Aswil. But maybe it was wrong to try to understand the man.

"Is it humiliating to be forced?" Aswil growled. "Well, don't worry. Soon you'll be weeping with happiness."

His self-confidence and aggressive personality were parts of his charm. But the way Aswil was acting now was the very definition of a tyrant. He never gave Tomoyuki the right to reject him. He believed that Tomoyuki was his to command.

"I...I think you're the one who feels humiliated," Tomoyuki said. "I think it infuriates you that there's someone who won't obey you."

"Tomoyuki." The wrinkles on Aswil's forehead deepened with his displeasure. "If you think you can escape by making me angry, you should just give it

up. It won't work. I have no intention of letting you go away."

"Aswil!"

Aswil pushed up the nightgown, exposing Tomoyuki's crotch. The Japanese man struggled to escape the shame and humiliation, but he accomplished nothing. Something cold dripped down between the cheeks of his butt and he gasped.

Aswil threw something to the floor, shattering it—one of the small bottles Tomoyuki had seen before. He'd had no idea the servants had prepared them for something like *this*.

"Nngh..." he groaned, biting his lip. If he didn't he knew he would scream.

Aswil's finger, soaked with oil, ran back and forth between Tomoyuki's cheeks. "It's just perfumed oil. That means it won't hurt you. There are many varieties of these oils."

"No... Aswil..."

"Don't be scared." Aswil's tongue skimmed a sticky trail over Tomoyuki's earlobe. "You'll start to like it soon. I know better than anyone how vulnerable you are to your own pleasure. Right?" he whispered just beside Tomoyuki's ear.

"Ah!" A shudder shot through Tomoyuki's body. He knew it wasn't from disgust. Aswil's finger slowly penetrated him. There was no pain, thanks to the oil. The finger pushed deep inside and began massaging him from within. "Mm...mph..."

A familiar feeling spread throughout Tomoyuki's body, he couldn't help but succumb to it. Six years had

passed, but now it didn't matter how often he said no. He himself didn't believe his refusals.

"Don't think about it," Aswil continued to whisper. "Just enjoy it."

Weakened by pleasure, Tomoyuki couldn't respond. And he had to admit that Aswil knew that better than anyone. He had been quite a slut six years ago.

He groaned. The stimulation on his erogenous zone numbed his back with the pleasure running deep inside him. His penis was not only erect, but nectar dripped from it, pooling on the floor.

He didn't want this, but everything was beyond his control.

"Ah...ahh," he cried softly as Aswil kissed the back of his neck.

"How does that feel?" Aswil's sweet, captivating voice came to him as if from far away. Tomoyuki shook his head silently.

"Answer me, Tomoyuki."

Aswil took a firm hold of his member. The slight pain gave a pleasure more intense and forced a deep sigh, steeped in passion, out of Tomoyuki.

"This is what happens if you don't answer me."

Tightly gripping the base of the penis, Aswil wiggled inside Tomoyuki. The Japanese man thought he had his voice under control, but it spilled out of him. He was sure he would go crazy if this went on much longer.

If it would all end up the same no matter what he did, he preferred to end this sooner rather than later. This conviction broke Tomoyuki.

"It's...good," he gasped.

To be honest, he found it hard to believe just how much he was reacting. He was still frighteningly susceptible to Aswil's caresses, even after six years.

"Better than that man?" Aswil prodded.

Tomoyuki didn't understand at first and just stared blankly back at Aswil. He couldn't guess what the question meant, or who "that man" might be.

Aswil apparently took Tomoyuki's silence badly. Angry, he pulled out his finger roughly. Then he pushed Tomoyuki away from him. His eyes beat down on the Japanese man, flashing. The cold, piercing stare sobered Tomoyuki from his ecstasy.

"Aswil..."

"The man you live with. Do you love him?" Aswil growled.

"What?" Then Tomoyuki finally knew who Aswil was talking about—one of his co-workers. His boss had asked him to take the man under his wing and he hadn't been able to refuse. The man lived far away, so when they worked late, Tomoyuki let him stay at his place.

Aswil had gotten the wrong idea about their relationship. But when had he found out about him in the first place? How much did he know?

"He's—" Tomoyuki started to explain, but changed his mind. He didn't need to explain himself to Aswil. This Aswil was a stranger to him.

Aswil's expression twisted with fury as Tomoyuki bit back his answer. His face was all the more terrible in its anger because of its beauty. "I don't care

what he is to you. Here, you will obey me."

"Are you...planning to make me part of your harem, then?" Tomoyuki taunted.

Aswil stared coldly at him, ignoring the provocation. "Unfortunately, men cannot be in harems."

From the emphasis Aswil placed on the word "unfortunately," Tomoyuki detected a hint of contempt for him, implying that he didn't deserve to be included in such a place. The acts they had shared so frequently and lovingly in the past were nothing more than weapons now.

"That *is* unfortunate," he hissed back. "That would be paradise for a man, being entirely surrounded by women."

They truly seemed to hate each other. In reality, Tomoyuki was only being pulled along by the swirling hatred that had grown inside him.

"Paradise, huh? 'For a man,' that's probably true," Aswil answered, giving him an obscene look. The man once again pressed his finger, slick with oil, against the opening to Tomoyuki's body. Tomoyuki bit his lip and struggled not to cry out. "But any harem would just be wasted on someone who so enjoys the touch of a man."

"Aswil!"

That was unforgivable. Blood rushed to his head in his anger and he made a wild attempt to escape from under Aswil.

This was no joking matter. He had been brought here to fulfill some whim of Aswil's, and now he was being showered with humiliating abuse. He wouldn't

stand for it. The Arabian man never gave the slightest thought to the feelings of others.

Tomoyuki was blinded by his fury at the other man's arrogance.

"Stop that," Aswil admonished. "Don't struggle."

"Shut up!" Tomoyuki yelled. "Why do you have to say things like that? Why can't you just let me go?"

He thrashed out violently. He didn't notice the pain of beating against the marble floor. He thought only of escape.

"Tomoyuki." Aswil clicked his tongue unpleasantly as the Japanese man pulled himself up from the floor. "Hold still."

Tomoyuki was cowed by the honey-colored eyes glaring at him.

Aswil forced him to straddle his legs and held him close with both arms, preventing any more of his struggles. Pressing his forehead against Tomoyuki's, he murmured once again, "Hold still."

Though the words were the same, Tomoyuki froze at the change in tone.

"Your arms are getting red," Aswil said. "It's because you keep struggling. There are going to be marks."

"Marks?" Tomoyuki echoed.

Aswil's voice was gentle, like long ago. That was the only sign of kindness he showed, but still Tomoyuki's heart ached. For an instant, he fell into the illusion that the last six years had never happened, that he was back in the past, when he loved Aswil and he had

complete faith that he was loved in return.

"Tomoyuki."

Aswil held his face and kissed him. The man's tongue traced over his lips coaxingly and they parted naturally. Aswil licked Tomoyuki's upper lip, he chewed his lower lip, and he pressed their mouths tightly together.

The kisses sent Tomoyuki's mind reeling and he trembled, no strength remained anywhere in his body. His head flopped from side to side, frustrated at the binding that held his hands.

Aswil trailed his lips from Tomoyuki's throat to his nape, as his hands slipped downwards, seeking their true desire.

"...nnggh," Tomoyuki moaned.

"Like that," Aswil murmured. "Yes...trust your body to me."

"A...swil..." Tomoyuki instinctively pulled his body away from the passion pressing down on him.

Aswil ruthlessly pulled him back, fixing him with a look and a kiss. His fingers pushed open the entrance to Tomoyuki's body, which quivered welcomingly now.

"Ah...no..."

Aswil's excited manhood broke through the entrance and pushed its way slowly into Tomoyuki's body. After six years, it caused some pain, but a familiar pleasure Tomoyuki had tasted so many times in the past washed over him.

Despite all of his resistance, he only wanted to surrender to this pleasure.

"I can't move," Aswil muttered. "Relax."

"No..." Tomoyuki whispered.

Though he still ached a bit, the oil made it easier for Aswil to enter him. But he had forgotten how to take it in further. Even hearing the pain in Aswil's voice as he said his name couldn't make him relax.

"Agh!"

Aswil had managed to push partway in, but he slipped back out. Sighing deeply, he stood up and moved to the bed, holding Tomoyuki in his arms.

"You never did it with that man? Or anyone else?" Aswil asked, unfastening the buttons of Tomoyuki's nightgown.

The Japanese man didn't respond, but words were unnecessary. Aswil knew the answer from his body's reaction.

Aswil's expression softened and he kissed Tomoyuki's hair and whispered close to his lips, "I'll be gentle then, like the first time."

How cruel could he be? He knew everything now, but he was going to submit Tomoyuki to even more humiliation. He knew Tomoyuki's body wouldn't stop him.

Tomoyuki was disgusted by the part of him that relinquished itself to Aswil, but that only strengthened his conviction to never yield his heart.

"My faridat," Aswil called out in a voice dripping with honeyed indulgence. His tongue skimmed over Tomoyuki's lips and Tomoyuki passively accepted all of Aswil's adoring kisses.



Chapter Two

When he woke up, Aswil was already gone. The hope that it had all just been a dream disappeared the instant Tomoyuki sat up in the canopied bed.

The buttons of his night shirt had been refastened, but the things they'd done last night lingered disgustingly in his mind and on his skin. No matter how carefully the evidence was cleared away afterwards, there was no way to eliminate the memories or the sensations that remained with him.

Tomoyuki had slept through the morning, as if he had been reluctant to reclaim his consciousness.

Why had Aswil done all this? Why was he so obsessed with Tomoyuki? Tomoyuki had spent all night thinking, and understood even less now.

All he was sure of was the revulsion he felt at so easily surrendering himself to Aswil. He told himself that he had been overwhelmed by pleasure. That way, his physical pleasure would be untainted by any dangerous emotions. That would be better than what really happened.

Maybe Aswil truly intended to lock him up with the women of the palace. Sooner or later, the man would marry. And he might take several more wives into the women's quarters after that. As many as four wives could

be recognized in Aswil's religion. Did the man intend to treat him like a property, like a wife? To keep him on the side for when he wanted something different?

Tomoyuki shuddered. He was horrified at the idea of a life spent waiting for Aswil's next visit. That was fine for the man's wives, since they would carry out the important duty of producing successors, but Tomoyuki would only exist as an object to sleep with.

"I can't believe this is happening," he whispered.

He was wrapping his arms around his shoulders, beginning to shake with disgust, when he heard a knock at the door.

He grimaced as he sat up. His joints creaked and a dull pain ran through his legs. He blamed the degeneracy of the night before, and a shame, deeper than the humiliation he already felt, welled up in him.

The door opened and Aswil appeared.

"You don't have to get up," he said as he came into the room and walked straight to the bed.

Tomoyuki gritted his teeth against the pain in his limbs and, showing none of it on his face, silently stood up from the bed.

What happened last night was nothing, he told himself so that he could pretend it was true.

"How are you? Any pain?" Aswil inquired.

Tomoyuki ignored him and turned toward the window. He wouldn't meet the other man's eyes nor speak to him. He wanted to show Aswil that he wasn't going to just accept whatever abuse was doled out to him.

"So after the curses comes silence." Aswil sighed dramatically. "That's fine. I have some work to do in Madina today. If you need anything, tell Sana. I'll come back tonight."

Aswil turned and left the room, utterly indifferent. It drove Tomoyuki crazy to hear the man so casually say that he would be back that night. He dug his nails into the palms of his hands.

Last night all over again, he thought. It made him eager to escape this place as soon as possible. The more time he spent with Aswil, the less he would be able to resist his charms. Tomoyuki knew himself well enough to realize that.

Sana was the next to come in.

"Good morning," she greeted.

Tomoyuki told himself that Sana knew nothing of what had happened the night before. This let him pretend that nothing really had happened.

"Good morning," he replied pleasantly. "Although it's already afternoon. I guess I was really worn out."

Sana smiled at him. "I'm glad you slept well. You look much better than you did yesterday."

He had mixed feelings about her compliment, knowing what it was that had made him sleep so soundly. "...Thank you."

Sana pushed a cart loaded with food into the room. He wanted to be stubborn and refuse the food, but his stomach was completely empty. That was only natural, since he hadn't eaten anything since coming to Saria.

"Thank you for bringing it all the way here," he said.

"Not at all," Sana answered. "Prince Aswil asked me to bring it to you. He had to go to the palace in Madina on official business, but he plans to return this evening."

"I see," he murmured.

So Aswil couldn't take him to the main palace in Madina after all. He realized that Aswil's choice of the Saria palace was motivated by the fact that the man didn't want anyone to know Tomoyuki was there. If others knew that the prince had abducted someone, even a man as powerful as Aswil would have some questions to answer. And if his family decided to investigate the relationship between them, Aswil would never be able to tell the truth.

"Would you prefer coffee or tea?" Sana inquired.

"Tea, please," Tomoyuki said.

He had a turkey and ham sandwich and fruit then yogurt. It was a menu just as well-suited to breakfast as to lunch.

"I'll leave your clothes here," Sana said.

"Thank you."

Sana looked uncomfortable at the gratitude Tomoyuki showed for everything.

"Please don't thank me," she said. "This is my job, and his majesty asked that I treat you as a nobleman."

Arabian countries were different from Japan. This was a country where class divisions had been

inherited for generations. The more Tomoyuki acted Japanese here, the more uncomfortable Sana would become.

"All right," he agreed pleasantly and changed the subject. "In that case, I'd like to see more of the palace. Can I take a look outside after I eat?"

He presumed that she saw him as a guest of Aswil's. He approached the subject casually, as if he only wanted to sightsee. That would be natural for a guest. But his real intention was different—he was going to find a way to escape the palace.

The country of Madina was about as big as the Japanese island of Kyushu. Like the majority of Arabian countries, the better part of Madina's national wealth was generated by oil. The huge amounts of oil money that Madina took in made the country prosperous, and, at the same time, enriched the coffers of the royal family. The lifestyle of Madina royalty was at a level of luxury that not even the wealthiest people in Japan could begin to approach.

And the amount of money that tourists contributed to Madina made up a not insignificant percentage of the nation's income. Guidebooks publicized the country's appeal, always mentioning the extraordinarily lavish public buildings and the deserts that tourists could visit unguided.

"We're close to a city, right?" Tomoyuki asked. "So tourists should be able to go hiking in the deserts here?"

"Yes," Sana answered. "It takes less than two hours to get from the city of Madina to Saria."

Less than two hours. Tomoyuki smiled at Sana as he ran calculations in his mind. Two hours wasn't that far. Escape should be possible. And if he was lucky, he might run into a tour group on the way. Then he could even try to get help. If he pretended to be a reckless tourist who had gone out into the desert unprepared, it would probably be all right. Although if something went wrong, he would be in trouble.

"I can't take you to the desert myself," Sana continued, "but I can accompany you to the garden after your meal. It's very beautiful. I'm sure that you'll find it lovely, too, Mr. Tomoyuki."

Sana's job required that she attentively fulfill all the needs of Aswil's guests. But she was not content to simply give Tomoyuki a tour—she wanted him to like what he saw, too.

She would probably be punished by Aswil if Tomoyuki disappeared, and that pained him, but right now he couldn't afford to think about anything but escape.

"If we wander around, the security guards might be upset," he said casually. "There are probably watchmen on the front and back gates, right?"

"That's correct," Sana said. "But it's fine. When vehicles go through the gates, things get a bit busy, so no one should mind if you take a stroll then."

Tomoyuki perked up a bit. "Cars come in? From outside?" That was worth pursuing.

Sana nodded as she poured tea into a cup.

She had no reason to be suspicious, since she believed Tomoyuki was only a guest of Aswil's. She

wouldn't have thought that Tomoyuki had the means to escape, anyway.

"The next one will come at 2 o'clock to deliver the food for dinner," she unwittingly explained.

"Really?" Tomoyuki murmured.

If it was delivering food for dinner, then that meant it probably came at a fixed time each day. The gates would open at 2 o'clock. He engraved this into his memory.

"Does Aswil keep cars here at the palace?" he asked.

"Yes, he does," Sana replied. "There are the vehicles Prince Aswil owns and the jeeps the guards use. But none of them may be used without his majesty's permission. A guard who was formerly employed here would use the vehicles for private purposes, and some say he did bad things."

"I'm sorry, I was just curious what kind of car Aswil drove," Tomoyuki said hastily to set Sana's mind at ease. She had inclined her head toward him with a slightly suspicious look. He had assumed there would be cars, but it seemed they wouldn't be easy to get to.

But he had to do something while Aswil was gone...

"How did Aswil get to Madina?" he asked instead.

"He always uses a helicopter," Sana revealed. "He doesn't often take a car anywhere. When he's staying in Saria, he goes on horseback exclusively."

"There are... horses?"

"That's correct," Sana beamed. "Prince Aswil is

extremely fond of them. Arabian horses are strong and very beautiful. There's a stable in the back of the palace."

Tomoyuki made up his mind to flee on horseback. He had riding experience from his time in England. He hadn't ridden for a while, but the skill would come back to him.

When Sana left the room, Tomoyuki reached for the clothes she had set out for him on a magnificently crafted console table. He pulled on smooth linen trousers and a white thawb. It was a typical Arabian dress, flowing down to his feet. He saw his reflection in a mirror placed on the table and smiled ruefully.

Despite the luxury of the clothes, on Tomoyuki it looked like a costume for a school play or anime convention. Seeing himself dressed up in Arabian clothing only underscored for him the necessity of getting back to Japan. Madina was not where he belonged.

Turning his eyes from the mirror, he looked around the room. He couldn't go out into the desert without a hat of some kind. He needed something to protect his head. He opened all the drawers and searched the wardrobe, but there was nothing. It was all empty.

He was forced to tear up the sheets and turn them into a makeshift keffiyeh. He covered himself from head to shoulder with the scraps in an improvised Arabian style.

He ate quickly and checked the time: 1:30. Thirty minutes to go. He wanted to see firsthand exactly what happened when the gates were opened at 2 o'clock.

He slipped out of the door. But before he had gone very far, he spotted a guard wearing a suit and

keffiyeh. Spying the sword at the man's hip, he retreated quickly back to his room.

He knew he wouldn't be able to trick the guard. After some thought, he concluded that he had no choice, but to take advantage of Sana. He waited for her to come back for the dishes, trying to outlast his impatience.

Just as he was beginning to get restless, a knock finally came at the door. He let out a deep sigh of relief when he saw Sana come in pushing her cart.

"Oh!" the woman cried out.

She must have noticed his handmade keffiyeh. Tomoyuki laughed, realizing that no explanation would get very far.

"I'll need this if I'm going for a walk, won't I?" he said. "I looked around for one, but didn't find anything."

"If you had asked me, I could have brought you one," Sana said.

"Oh. I suppose I should have done that," he replied ambiguously. He couldn't exactly tell her that he had hoped to sneak out without anyone noticing.

"Would you like more tea?" she inquired, letting the subject drop.

"No, thank you. Would you mind showing me the garden now?" he asked, smothering his impatience.

Sana hesitated only a moment. Then she stopped in the middle of cleaning up the dishes and made Tomoyuki's wishes her priority.

It was almost 2 o'clock.

As soon as they left the room, Tomoyuki recited the line he had prepared for Sana. "If possible, I don't

want to see any guards...I'm not used to them. And it embarrasses me to say this, but they scare me."

The woman considered it for a moment. She was no doubt thinking only of how to make the guest's stay as enjoyable as possible.

"This way," she finally said, walking quietly.

Tomoyuki followed a half-step behind her, nerves on edge. Every time they passed one of the tiled pillars, his heart jumped into his throat, expecting a guard to appear from behind it.

They walked through a maze of passageways, progressing through the palace without seeing anyone else. He would be able to get outside easily now. Just then, Sana stopped, interrupting his thoughts.

"Who goes there?"

The question came from a uniformed guard to their right. A sword was at his hip. The guard's gaze passed over Sana and landed fiercely on Tomoyuki.

Sana drew back, distancing herself from the guard. Custom forbade men and women to speak to each other familiarly. Sana's interaction with Tomoyuki was allowable as a function of her work, and perhaps, also because he was a foreigner.

"This is Prince Aswil's guest," she explained.

"Prince Aswil has ordered that no one be allowed outside," the guard said, staring at Tomoyuki from behind his thick eyebrows and bushy black beard.

Tomoyuki's heart began pounding faster, but he collected himself. "That's odd," he said. "He told me I could go wherever I wanted."

He took a step closer to the guard. He wasn't

going to put Sana in any more danger.

"I've heard Saria is a magnificent city," he continued. "Could I not just smell the air outside and gaze at the landscape? Oh, I forgot to mention, I'm sheikh Aswil's college friend, Makabe."

He offered his right hand. Handshakes were the customary greeting in Arabian cultures. The social superior or the person with the higher status always initiated the offer. The guard was probably close to Tomoyuki's own age, and as a foreigner, social position was irrelevant for Tomoyuki. But the guard would have trouble ignoring the old college friend of "Aswil."

The guard showed such reluctance to return the handshake that Tomoyuki began to get nervous.

"I'll contact his majesty and confirm that," the guard said. "Please wait a moment."

"That's not necessary. I don't want to interrupt sheik Aswil's work," Tomoyuki objected with a smile. The guard needed to be persuaded to let it go. If they contacted Aswil, it would be his own work that would get interrupted, not Aswil's. "I'll just give up on going outside. If I could just see the back garden, that would be fine. I'd like to see the Arabian horses. You could come along, if you want to keep an eye on me."

He could probably figure out the location of the gate even if he didn't go outside.

After some hesitation, the guard reluctantly accepted the suggestion. Since he wasn't allowed outside, the guard would serve as a reminder of Tomoyuki's restrictions.

"Sana, this man can guide me now," he said.

"You can go back to your other duties."

"All right, sir," Sana nodded with relief.

Tomoyuki smiled at her and they parted. He then followed the guard.

"I've heard Arabian horses are very beautiful," he said.

"The most beautiful in the world. And the strongest," the guard spoke enthusiastically at Tomoyuki's praise.

"I can't wait," Tomoyuki gushed. "I wonder if Aswil would let me ride one if I asked. I may not look like it, but I'm quite the rider." He had re-emphasized his friendship with Aswil, hoping to keep the man off his guard. He couldn't see the guard's expression, but the man seemed to be relaxing.

They stopped in front of a set of double doors and Tomoyuki clamped his mouth shut.

"Please don't go outside," the guard shrewdly reminded him before opening the door.

Tomoyuki's first reaction as he gazed outside was shock at the grandeur of the garden. The lush palms bathing in the sunlight were the same as those in the front garden, but here, this garden was an unbroken landscape of lush greenery. There was also a semi-circular pond where two horses stood up to their ankles drinking the water. Past them was a gazebo, and several horses trotted nimbly in a stable yard off to the right.

Where the other garden gloried in its splendor, this one was serene. With the horses scattered through it, it looked like a painting.

Tomoyuki also saw for the first time that the

outer walls of the Saria palace were white. The trim around the decorative windows, as numerous as the round pillars studding the wall, were all a pale blue in the sunlight. He hadn't come here to admire the scenery, but even so, he was transfixed.

A loud crash brought him back to his senses in an instant. What had made that noise? The guard escorting him looked troubled at the unusual sound.

The horses by the pond grew wild from fear. A stable hand came quickly to soothe them, but the horses resisted, shaking their heads and rearing up.

The guard took a step forward, then stopped and looked back at Tomoyuki. He seemed unsure of what he should do, weighing his two choices for several seconds. But when Tomoyuki nodded to him, he ran in the direction of the noise.

As soon as he was left alone, Tomoyuki ran out into the garden, heading toward the pond. He murmured soothingly to one of the horses agitated by the noise, and it gradually regained its calm.

With the horses placated once more, Tomoyuki and the stable hand exchanged smiles.

"Thank you for your help," the man said. "Who are you?"

"Tomoyuki Makabe."

As he stroked the horse's neck, Tomoyuki wondered how best to explain why he was at the palace. He had told the guard he was a friend of Aswil's. It wasn't a lie, but he had only said it to manipulate the guard.

"Are you by any chance Prince Aswil's

friend?" the man asked.

So there was no need to explain.

The stable hand came to shake Tomoyuki's hand happily. "The maids have been talking about a Japanese friend he brought back with him. This is the first time Prince Aswil has invited a friend over to Saria, so everyone is very excited."

"I...see," Tomoyuki mumbled.

He shook hands with the man, who was named Mathal, with mixed emotions. The word "first" triggered another memory in his mind.

—I've never felt completely comfortable with anyone before. You're the first, Tomoyuki.

Aswil had told him that six years ago. He had been happy to hear it then, but now, he just thought of it as more pillow talk. But maybe it had been true.

Aswil looked different from the other people in Madina. He wasn't pure-blooded. Tomoyuki had no way of knowing what that meant inside the royal family, which valued blood relations so highly, but it was obviously unusual.

Tomoyuki put a stop to his rambling thoughts and smiled wryly. What was he thinking? It didn't matter to him what Aswil's life was like. The man was first in line for the throne.

"I wonder what that noise was." After releasing the man's hand, he gazed in the direction the guard had gone to. It looked like there was some sort of commotion.

Mathal seemed worried, too, and headed toward the commotion. "Indeed. If you don't need me, sir, I'd

like to go see for myself."

Tomoyuki walked with him, holding the horse's reins.

The lawn was cut in two by a brick-paved roadway, running between rows of date palms. Several guards were standing in a group, a truck parked in their midst. They didn't seem particularly tense. It looked like the driver of the truck had just been careless and collided with a lamp post.

"Oh, that's the truck that brings supplies in," the stable hand said with relief. "Like the food for dinner."

Beside him, Tomoyuki stood riveted by the sight of the gate just past the truck. He was sure that that was the rear gate Sana had told him about. He could see that the palace was built in an L shape, with gates in the north and south walls and patios facing the stables. The exquisitely molded brass gate opened and closed automatically, and had one guard posted at it.

The palace guards had immediately leapt into action at the unusual sound. But once they'd realized that it was only a simple accident, they stood around chatting inattentively.

And Tomoyuki was holding a horse's reins in his hand.

He had only wanted to see what things looked like outside, to check the position of the gate, and if it really opened at 2 o'clock. But now, the perfect opportunity lay before him. He didn't think a better chance would ever come again. If he missed this one, who knew when the next would come?

He tightened his grip on the reins in his hand.

When the truck left, the gate would open. If he made his move then, he was sure to get out. He plotted out his best course of action and readied himself.

"Shall we go back?" the stable hand asked. Tomoyuki gave a disinterested reply, and continued watching the guards' movements.

Once they'd finished checking the vehicle for damage, the guards dispersed. The engine started up and the gate began to slowly open. As soon as the truck began to move, Tomoyuki leapt onto the horse's back and snapped the reins.

The guards were startled by the sudden appearance of a horse. But the gate was already open and Tomoyuki galloped through it past the truck.

He urged the horse at top speed. He didn't hear the commotion behind him. He was entirely focused on directing the horse away from the palace. After they had run for some time, he looked back, but the rich green oasis of Saria was already out of sight.

He was in the middle of the desert. Sand blanketed the ground in all directions, the glaring sunlight reflecting off of it to throw up dancing mirages. The desert burned all around him.

Before long, Tomoyuki was bathing in sweat beneath his thawb.

He pushed on, but no matter how far he went, the desert continued without so much as the first brick of a building. Sana had said it took less than two hours to reach the city, but he began to worry that he would never actually find it.

When he reached Madina, he could go to the

embassy and say that he had lost his passport and they would probably be able to help him. But if he never reached the city, that didn't really matter. His hope of running into a tour group grew fainter as well. He saw nothing in any direction. He was haunted by the idea that he was going in the wrong direction.

"I guess I should have brought some water," he muttered to himself.

Especially if he was going to get lost like this. A terrifying idea rose up in his mind, but he quickly shook it off.

It was strange that he had gotten lost. Two hours was only the distance between his house and Narita airport. Encouraged, he hurried on. He knew perfectly well that it was misguided to compare the desert to Tokyo, but without some reassurance, he would only start to panic.

Arabian horses were reputed to be strong, and this horse lived up to its heritage, kicking up the sand powerfully. Tomoyuki rallied his spirit, telling himself that the hardest part was getting out of the palace, and he'd done that.

But as more time passed, that hope, too, evaporated. The sun blazed directly overhead, cooking him. A river of sweat poured down his back. His throat was rough with thirst and his hands, resting on the reins, had lost all their strength.

He began to lose hope. What if he died, lost out here like this? His mind, weakened by the heat, offered him nothing but bleak possibilities.

What would Aswil think of Tomoyuki's

disappearance? Maybe he would search for him, since he had run out alone into the desert.

"Aswil..."

Saying the name only made Tomoyuki feel more hopeless. He knew it was selfish to rely on Aswil since he had run away from him, but he couldn't help it.

He struggled to shake off these cowardly thoughts, his head swinging back and forth on top of the horse.

That was when he saw it. In the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a faint, sandy cloud rising from the desert. A jeep was coming towards him from up ahead.

Tomoyuki shouted and urged the horse towards it. The jeep stopped. As he climbed off the horse and ran up beside the jeep, the window lowered. A middle-aged man wearing a green checked keffiyeh sat in the driver's seat.

"Thank you," he croaked.

"What happened?" the driver asked.

The man in the passenger seat had a magnificent beard that trailed down to his chest. It was hard to tell his age, but many deep wrinkles cut across his forehead.

These two men were clearly not tourists.

"I came out to sightsee, but I got lost," Tomoyuki lied.

"Alone? Without any supplies?" The two stared at him in amazement.

"Yes," he answered. "I underestimated the desert. I guess I just thought there would be lots of other tourists around."

The bearded man whispered something to the driver. They had a thick accent and he couldn't understand what they said.

But the bearded man said exactly what Tomoyuki had hoped he would, "We'll take you to the city. Get in."

"Do you have any water?" he inquired before getting inside the vehicle.

His throat was so dry it was getting hard to remain standing, and his mouth tasted gritty.

"Oh, I'm sorry. We weren't thinking."

The bearded man handed him a plastic bottle of water. Tomoyuki took it with shaking hands and gulped it down eagerly. Cool water had never tasted so delicious sliding down his throat.

"Hop in," the driver said.

"Right," Tomoyuki replied. But he suddenly realized that he hadn't thought about what would happen to the horse. He couldn't just abandon it in the middle of the desert.

"That's a nice horse," the bearded man said.

"Duraïd, you ride the horse back."

"Duraïd?" Tomoyuki echoed.

The man named Duraïd got out of the driver's seat. Tomoyuki was nearly delirious with gratitude that they were willing to take the horse back to town.

The name Duraïd means someone who has missing teeth, or no teeth at all, but this man was only missing one of his front teeth.

"Thank you so much." Tomoyuki gave the horse to Duraïd. He was relieved that he could still smile.

The bearded man moved to the driver's seat and Tomoyuki took the passenger's side. He knew this could be dangerous. He wasn't sure if he could completely trust these men, but he decided that it was much more dangerous to be wandering around in the desert. It was a necessary risk.

The bearded man was named Kadim.

The jeep slowly began moving, Duraid following close behind them. The horse showed no signs of fatigue, despite having run so far already.

"You saved my life. I was afraid that if I didn't find my way back to town, my tour group would have all kinds of problems," Tomoyuki said, hinting that there were people who would notice if something happened to him.

Kadim nodded. "Where are you from?"

The jeep shook with terrifying fervor.

"Japan," Tomoyuki replied affably, his back held rigid in an effort to keep from falling over.

"Japan!" Kadim exclaimed. "You're far from home."

Judging by his mild manner and speaking style, Kadim was about as old as Tomoyuki's parents. His hoarse voice suited the image of a desert dweller.

"Yes," Tomoyuki said dryly.

"It must be a nice country," Kadim remarked. "I met another Japanese fellow a long time ago, and he was nice, too."

The man looked unfriendly, but he liked foreigners. You couldn't call their conversation lively, but the tone never turned unpleasant.

"Where did you learn Arabic?" Kadim asked. "You speak it well."

Tomoyuki was at a loss on how to answer this question. He had learned Arabic from Aswil. It was Aswil's native language, so at one time, Tomoyuki had studied it with great interest.

"I taught myself," he lied.

"That's amazing," Kadim narrowed his eyes and stroked his bearded chin. His reaction told Tomoyuki that he had not answered modestly. Boasting was an impure act and so, even if praised, one should always reply meekly.

Through the clouds of sand, Tomoyuki glimpsed a village. It was not Madina. He cast a curious glance at the driver.

"You don't mind if we make a little side trip, do you? We have some pressing business here," Kadim said, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

Tomoyuki couldn't protest. He was the one who had suddenly interrupted Kadim and Duraid's trip. "It's fine, as long as I get back to the hotel while there's still light out."

Kadim nodded with a smile and drove the jeep into the village.

He threaded through a labyrinth of alleyways, surrounded on all sides by stone buildings. The houses were severe, defended by wooden doors, and few people were in the streets. On the porch of one house, a circle of men sat around a water pipe, smoking. They raised their hands to the jeep as it passed and Kadim returned their greeting.

The smell of food mixed with the stink of sewage saturated the air inside the jeep through its open windows.

After they had left the houses behind, the view opened up. Dozens of tents were set up in a square, in what appeared to be a market. This place was teeming with men, women, and children.

Tomoyuki was truly taken aback. Madina was a country made rich by oil production. It was famous for its capital city, its streets lined with luxury hotels, and its hospitable desert, traversable in a mere two hours. It was one of the leading tourist destinations in the world. He knew only the glossy images of the country. But this time, he was seeing a totally different side of Madina. It was almost as if he'd wandered into another country.

The jeep passed once more into an alley.

Tomoyuki suddenly realized that he could no longer see Duraid behind them. He started to worry about Aswil's horse.

"Um," he was just about to ask Kadim about it when the jeep stopped.

They were outside the biggest building he'd seen so far.

This must be the only district with apartment buildings. The rows of tiny windows told him that it was a three story building. There were metal bars on all the windows, and the light of lamps spilled out from inside. Tomoyuki thought it looked extremely shady.

Getting out of the driver's seat, Kadim kindly came around to open the passenger door. Tomoyuki got out of the jeep, still staring up at the building.

"I'll wait here," he said.

"I'd hate to interfere with your work."

To be honest, he didn't want to go inside such a suspicious-looking building, but of course he couldn't say that. If he did something to upset Kadim, and by some small chance the man refused to take him further, he wouldn't be able to get to Madina.

Kadim laid his hand on Tomoyuki's back. "You won't interfere. Come with me. We'll have some Arabian coffee."

Tomoyuki felt a chill run down his spine, but he couldn't refuse.

"Well, just one cup," he acquiesced, walking helplessly toward the entrance.

Had he been wrong to get in the car? Shouldn't he ask them to take him back as soon as possible? He was growing uneasy.

"If it gets too late, the other tour members are going to go to a lot of unnecessary trouble over me, so I'd like to at least tell them I'm all right," he said as they went in.

He didn't really want to call anybody, it was just a lie to point out once again that there were other people waiting for him.

Kadim shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "I'm sorry, but the phone here isn't connected."

"Oh, I see," Tomoyuki's voice sounded bleak.

There were no door nor any bars over the arched entrance and so they simply passed inside. Oil lamps flickered from the ceiling. It wasn't only a phone line that the building lacked, but electricity, too, apparently.

Tomoyuki walked with Kadim down a barely

illuminated stone pathway. Their footsteps echoed off the walls of the building, striking with each step a new note of fear into Tomoyuki. This wasn't an apartment.

An unusual bittersweet scent reminded Tomoyuki of burning incense. His eyes scoured his surroundings warily when he heard the faint cries of kittens from somewhere in the shadows. The air was dry, but he felt a heaviness clinging to his skin.

He turned around with a start. A woman wrapped in a black Arabian dress had appeared out of nowhere, following closely behind Tomoyuki without so much as the sound of a footfall.

He couldn't even guess at her age since everything except her eyes was covered up. She regarded him with cool eyes, showing no emotion.

Kadim stopped ahead of him and Tomoyuki nearly bumped into him, his attention still focused on the woman behind them. He jerked to a stop as well.

Kadim was standing in front of a wooden door. Passing Tomoyuki, the woman drew up beside Kadim and whispered something in his ear. Kadim nodded and she opened the door.

"After you," Kadim waved Tomoyuki inside first, then followed him in. "Bring the guest coffee."

The woman lowered her eyes at Kadim's order and silently shut the door.

"Um..." Tomoyuki's voice trailed off as he entered what looked like a private room.

The furniture was all extremely costly, despite the humility of the building. A table of stretched cowhide was set upon a carpet spread over the floor, and a

thin tapestry covered the wall. Unusual dishes and clay pots decorated the walls beside a counter set further back in the room.

A man appeared from the next room.

"You're late, Kadim," he said.

He sat down unceremoniously on a sofa, smoking a cigar. His eyes crawled over Tomoyuki's body, as if calculating his price.

"I'm glad you're here," Kadim approached the sofa where the man sat. "I made sure we weren't followed."

The man smiled vaguely as he chewed the cigar. "Why? My drivers are big guys."

While Kadim and the man talked together, Tomoyuki studied them furtively. The man wore a white keffiyeh and thawb. He had dark brown skin and a craggy face. His features were perfect, tinged with the arrogance characteristic of a well-born man. One knee was drawn up to his chest, but he still carried himself nobly.

"So we have a guest," the man commented. "Or are we going to use him to entertain another guest? As far as I can tell, he looks like a man."

Kadim turned back to look over his shoulder at Tomoyuki and chuckled. "What of it? These things happen all the time in Ziyad. We just can't let word get out."

"True." The man chewed his cigar and narrowed his eyes.

Feeling an ugly turn in the atmosphere, Tomoyuki braced himself.

"What did you tell him to get him to come with you?" the man asked.

"He's a Japanese man who got lost in the desert," Kadim replied.

"Hold on a minute! That's inviting international attention." The man spoke with surprise, but he didn't really look all that shocked.

"Come now, Zafar, sir, you know better than that," Kadim wheedled. "Once I get him in my brothel, he'll be dead to the world. No one would ever be able to find him again."

Tomoyuki went pale. "My brothel," Kadim had said. So this was a brothel under Kadim's management. No wonder it had such a corrupt feel to it.

Tomoyuki's nervousness had certainly been well-founded. Kadim was obviously nothing like the helpful old man he had acted like in the desert. He now looked at Tomoyuki with the cold-blooded eyes of a snake. A chill ran down the Japanese man's spine. He felt as if he might crumble to pieces. But the men went on with their conversation, about even more ominous topics.

"I'm sure we could find any number of buyers for someone as good-looking as him. And there are some with interests in that direction who have a particular fancy for Asians." Kadim's mouth twisted into an ugly shape as he spoke these horrifying words.

The man called Zafar leaned forward and set his cigar aside in an ash tray, then stood up. Tomoyuki's instinct was to run, but Kadim seized his arm before he could.

Zafar took hold of Tomoyuki's chin, taking his time. "You can definitely charge a high price for this one. You don't already belong to someone, do you?"

This was even more horrifying and, suffocating with terror, Tomoyuki shook off Zafar's hand.

"I don't understand the question, so I can't answer it." He glared at the man with as much defiance as he could muster. Holding onto his determination was the only thing he could do to avoid being consumed by his panic.

He had been so focused on escaping the palace and Aswil that he had lost sight of anything else. In a foreign country, a single wrong decision can lead to unimaginable results, and he hadn't considered the negative ramifications of his actions.

"Insolent foreigner!" Kadim yelled. "How dare you refuse Lord Zafar's hand! Why don't you test him yourself, sir? He might understand his position a bit better then."

Tomoyuki couldn't believe what he was hearing. Paralyzed by shock, he found it impossible to react. He wanted to get out of here right now. But he couldn't manage to examine the opportunities for escape through the anxiety he felt. If he acted rashly and inflamed the situation...

He had to calm down. If he was calm, he would be able to think of something. He desperately needed to believe that. It didn't matter how much he regretted his recklessness, he had no choice but to get through this himself.

"Good idea," Zafar agreed.

He reached out once more with the hand that the Japanese man had shaken off. Tomoyuki had just told himself to stay calm, but he shoved Zafar away without thinking. Zafar staggered back and Kadim bristled with fury.

"Who do you think you are?" Kadim's face was scarlet as he seized Tomoyuki's arms. "I guess you won't behave unless we hurt you."

Kadim twisted Tomoyuki's arms behind him and he howled with pain. The man was surprisingly strong for such a small man, not daunted in the least by the Japanese man's resistance.

Tomoyuki's joints were stretched to their limit, pain coursing through him as Kadim's fingers dug into his arms. He groaned.

"Don't struggle, or I'll cut your arm off right here," Kadim shouted.

At that moment, the woman they had seen in the courtyard appeared out of nowhere and drew near without a sound. She kneeled before Tomoyuki and efficiently held his thawb out of the way. In another moment, the pants he wore beneath it were around his ankles.

"No! Don't!" Tomoyuki yelled.

He thrashed around, but Kadim held his arms securely and pushed him roughly to his knees. He was sure his arms were going to snap.

The woman put her hand to Tomoyuki's underwear.

"No! Get away from me!" he screeched.

"It's obviously pointless to struggle. Now let

Lord Zafar have a look at you." A degenerate smile crept over Kadim's face as he pressed close behind Tomoyuki.

Zafar himself stopped Kadim. "That's enough. Release him."

The man didn't look particularly offended; on the contrary, he seemed to be enjoying himself. His lips twitched into a crooked smile and he shook his head with a theatrical gesture.

"Aswil's guest intrigues me," he said, "but unfortunately, I have no interest in sleeping with a man."

Tomoyuki was shocked at the sudden mention of Aswil's name. How had Zafar known? Kadim seemed just as surprised, jumping back, his eyes wide.

"Aswil's guest?" he whispered, his grip falling away immediately.

Rather than nursing his freed arms, Tomoyuki fumbled to arrange his clothes, shaking from the shame he had come so close to experiencing.

Zafar returned to his old place on the sofa as if nothing at all had happened. He sat down again, one knee drawn up, and picked up his cigar. "That, or he's a thief," he added.

"Wh-what do you mean?" Kadim stuttered, moving closer to Zafar and leaning towards him.

"Look at the thawb he's wearing," Zafar pointed out. "No one but the royal family has silk as fine as that around here. I suspect we'll find the Murshid coat of arms embroidered in the lining. Aswil must have invited him to the Saria palace."

Tomoyuki couldn't judge the quality of the silk he was wearing. Neither could Kadim, probably. He hadn't checked the crest, but Kadim was scowling and Tomoyuki could see sweat gathering on the man's forehead.

"Why didn't you tell me? If only I'd known!" Kadim yelled.

The outburst didn't ruffle Zafar in the least. He must be on familiar terms with Aswil, since he hadn't used a title, but Tomoyuki couldn't imagine what business the royal family might have at a degenerate place like this.

"We'll send him back at once," Kadim said. "Please put in a good word for me, sir."

Zafar responded to Kadim's panic by puffing serenely on his cigar. "He's the heir to the throne. No, we might as well call him the king now. I'm not sure how much influence my good word will have."

"But..." Kadim protested.

Tomoyuki's mind was in chaos as he listened to this exchange. It was Aswil's fault that he was in this situation in the first place, and now Aswil would be his salvation. It was ironic. But he was still incredibly lucky that Zafar had been here.

"Anyway, it seems it's too late," Zafar said, looking up.

Tomoyuki, Kadim, and the black-robed woman all followed his gaze and listened.

They heard a faint noise. It grew closer by the moment until it became a roar. Tomoyuki recognized it, too—the noise of propellers. At last the noise fell silent,

and in its place they heard babbling all around them.

It was impossible to say how much time passed. One minute, two. Then they heard the sound of footsteps on stone.

The door burst open, revealing Aswil, his white thawb fluttering around him. Tomoyuki was the first thing he fixed his eyes on as he strode into the room. His severe expression softened for only a moment. But then his eyebrows knitted together once again, his displeasure evident.

Tomoyuki stayed on his feet, unable to make the slightest move. He couldn't pull himself together, but it was more than just that. Joy, sorrow, embarrassment, and many other emotions flooded his heart.

"Zafar," Aswil called out in a low voice.

He was dressed in a pure white keffiyeh and thawb. Tomoyuki was awed by his majesty and stared at him, transfixed, forgetting all else.

"Tell me what's been going on here," Aswil ordered.

He was a desert lion. A nervous energy filled the room at his threat, couched in his glaring, honey-colored eyes.

"Oh, we met by chance," Kadim answered. "I wanted to offer him some coffee, but I suppose it's time to be sending him home."

"I'm not talking to you," Aswil snapped, sweeping aside the explanation.

Kadim paled and held his tongue.

"Zafar."

The second time Aswil said his name, Zafar

unhurriedly stubbed out his cigar. "Aswil, please don't blame Kadim," he finally said. "I'm sure he never imagined that a guest of yours would be wandering around lost in the desert."

A small muscle in Aswil's temple twitched. Tomoyuki didn't know which of Zafar's insults Aswil was reacting to, but it was clear that he was infuriated.

"I can't overlook this, no matter what his reasons were," Aswil said.

"That's perfectly understandable," Zafar agreed. "But would you consider forgiving it this time, out of consideration for me? Even I wasn't aware that you had a guest at the palace in Saria."

Zafar's theatrical tone was no doubt deliberate. Tomoyuki thought he detected a hint of bargaining in the man's voice as well—forget all this in exchange for my silence.

The brunt of Aswil's anger was reserved for Tomoyuki, but the man didn't look at him. He was obviously more upset at Tomoyuki than anyone else for acting so stupidly and getting caught in such a dangerous place.

"Cousin, I swear that we've done nothing to him," Zafar added. "Ask him yourself."

Cousin. Tomoyuki remembered now. Zafar al-Ibrahim, Aswil's younger cousin, and the next in line for the throne.

"Trouble will catch up with you soon enough if you keep affiliating yourself with a disgraceful place like this," Aswil shot back icily.

Zafar gave a small smirk. "I'll keep your advice



in mind, cousin. We can all agree that the Ziyad brothel is a scandalous pit, within Madina's borders, but isolated from it.... Isn't that right, Kadim?"

Kadim looked only more distraught that Zafar was asking him to back this up.

Zafar's eyes turned to Tomoyuki. "Ah, the guest. If you run into any trouble, feel free to come by. I might be able to help you."

Aswil did not respond. He didn't give Tomoyuki a chance to respond, either. He grabbed the Japanese man by the arm and pulled him roughly out of the room.

As soon as they were outside the building, Aswil's hand slipped away. He strode silently up the alley and Tomoyuki had to jog to catch up. This wasn't the right time to thank Aswil for saving him.

Aswil's guards were waiting for him in front of the brothel.

They came out into the square, where the helicopter stood. Aswil got in, but Tomoyuki hesitated for a moment. Aswil shot him a look and he climbed in, compelled. The guards then got into the front seats.

The helicopter rose into the air.

Aswil spent the entire ride in silence, facing forward. Tomoyuki had missed his chance to express his gratitude, and in the end, they returned to the Saria palace without saying a word to each other.

Sana ran up to him when they reached the palace. "Mr. Tomoyuki! I'm so glad you're safe!"

Tomoyuki regretted what he'd done to Sana.

She had been so worried about him that she was crying.

"Sana..." He wanted to tell her that he was sorry, but she wouldn't let him.

"It must have been terrible when your horse was spooked by the noise of the accident," she babbled.

"Huh?" He stared at Sana, but her shoulders shook, as if she was frightened. He knew perfectly well that the horse hadn't been spooked, but that seemed to be the story the servants had decided to stick to.

"Sana, you may go. Thank you," Aswil said gently.

Tomoyuki expected Aswil to be outraged, but the man was exactly the same as always. He could tell how much Aswil trusted Sana, though he had hardly ever seen them together.

When Sana left, Tomoyuki was left alone with Aswil. The moment the door closed, an oppressive feeling descended over the room.

"What a ridiculous thing to do," Aswil began railing. The corners of his eyes pulled themselves up and deep wrinkles cut across his brow. He could not hide his passionate anger. "What were you thinking, running off into the desert all alone? What do you think would have happened if Zafar hadn't been there?"

Tomoyuki drew his lips tight. Even if his own reckless actions had put him in danger, he wasn't about to let Aswil criticize him for it. Whose fault was it that he'd been forced to do such a thing, anyway?

"Tomoyuki, please say something for yourself," Aswil barked.

Tomoyuki averted his eyes and moved away,

annoyed at being scolded by him.

"You're..." Aswil trailed off and didn't say anything more. He was probably going to criticize Tomoyuki again, but apparently thought better of it. He rubbed his forehead, looking tired, and gave a long sigh. "When you disappeared into the desert, Ziyad was the first place I searched. If you were there, you would be in more danger than anywhere else. And if any more time had passed, things would have been different. Even though my first move was to search Ziyad, if I had waited too long, I would never have been able to track you down again. That's the kind of place Ziyad is."

Tomoyuki realized now just how lucky he had been. If Zafar hadn't been there, or if Aswil hadn't come for him, he would be somewhere very different right now. The Japanese concept of the world made it impossible to imagine how huge the price could be for acting carelessly even once.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Aswil took his hand from his head and looked at Tomoyuki. But the Japanese man still didn't feel like making eye contact and kept his eyes lowered.

"Sana was in tears when she told me what happened," Aswil continued. "She heard the commotion and ran out to see what was happening. She got the story from the stable hand. Although, the guard who came to report to me didn't mention that the horse was spooked."

Tomoyuki had really done a horrible thing³⁰ Sana. He blamed himself without hesitation.

"Tomoyuki."

Aswil opened his arms wide. Before Tomoyuki had time to get away, he was engulfed in an embrace so strong it made his bones crack.

"Aswil..." he squeaked.

"Don't run away," Aswil whispered fiercely. "If you do this again, I don't know what I'll do."

His words were overpowering, but Tomoyuki was painfully aware of how much worry he'd caused Aswil. Tomoyuki endured Aswil's need to hold him now as best as he could, because he had no intention of obeying the man.

It was blindingly obvious that if he submitted to him now, there was no telling what would happen. Staying in Madina and doing as Aswil wished was the same as denying himself his own life. He would have to abandon many things, like his peaceful life and all the work he'd put into his career.

But he didn't really care about those things. No, what he couldn't tolerate was being asked to abandon his pride. If he ever did that, sooner or later he would go crazy.

"I just want to go back to Japan," he whispered.

"That again." Aswil pushed him roughly away.

Tomoyuki looked straight at him. "I'll say it as many times as I need to. I have to go back. I don't belong here. It doesn't matter what you think, because I am going back to Japan."

He couldn't stay in Madina. He had no future here.

"And next time? You'll let yourself be forced into a brothel?" Aswil asked, obviously not interested in

discussing the topic any further.

Tomoyuki didn't hesitate to reply, "That might be better than being in this palace."

One corner of Aswil's mouth drew up in disgust. "Ridiculous."

Tomoyuki knew it was ridiculous. But there was no way he could give in to this situation. He would have liked to list his complaints, but he didn't feel up to it.

Aswil glared at Tomoyuki severely, but then suddenly grabbed him up in both arms. Stunned by the sudden movement, Tomoyuki was easily thrown onto the bed. He made a move to escape immediately, but Aswil's body pressed down on him before he could.

"What are you doing?" he asked frantically.

"I'm just checking to make sure they didn't do anything to you," Aswil said.

"Are you kidding?" Tomoyuki screamed, stunned at this mind-boggling response.

"No, I'm not," Aswil whispered heartlessly in Tomoyuki's ear.

Sprawled out on the sheets, the Japanese man mustered a tenacious resistance, but he was in such a cruelly disadvantageous position that he accomplished nothing.

"They...they didn't do anything!" he said. "You came before they could."

Aswil would not accept the explanation. "You would say anything."

He held the Japanese man down and rolled up his thigh, then tore off his pants and underwear.

Tomoyuki clawed at the sheets, rocked by a

feeling much stronger than shame. It was as if the other man couldn't believe that there existed a person who would run away from him.

"Aswil..." Tomoyuki felt hungry eyes on him and his legs trembled. "That's enough. You've seen it for yourself now," he begged.

Why are you doing this to me? he wanted to scream.

He ground his teeth together, but the only thing keeping him in check was the fact that Aswil was watching him. He never wanted to reveal his weakness to the other man. If he showed it even once, he would do it again and again. And if he ever stopped thinking about what he was doing, he would begin to obey Aswil.

Aswil seemed to have sensed the Japanese man's silent rejection.

"Not yet," he said in a cold voice, raising Tomoyuki's hips up high. There was no chance to fight back.

"Stop...that!" Tomoyuki protested.

"You're already closed up tight again, despite everything I did to you last night," Aswil said. "How precious...you're that shy?"

"Aswil!"

"But you're all red," Aswil said persistently.

Tomoyuki's cheeks flushed from the lewd insults raining down on him. Aswil was close enough that Tomoyuki could feel his breath. How much did the man need to demean him before he'd be satisfied?

"I bet you're even redder inside," Aswil added.

"—agh!" Tomoyuki groaned.

Aswil's fingers brushed across his hole, and Tomoyuki's mind flashed back to last night. Aswil hadn't been lying when he'd said they would do it like it was the first time. He had been so gentle that Tomoyuki had wished he would be rougher.

"No! No..." Tomoyuki whispered.

"No matter how much you struggle, you cannot defy me," Aswil hissed back. "I thought I taught you that last night. In my palace, you have no choice but to obey me."

"Aswil—ah..."

Aswil was stroking the entrance to Tomoyuki's body. He seemed to be on the verge of entering him, and Tomoyuki's body stiffened with anticipation.

"You'll stop refusing me soon enough," Aswil said confidently. "I'll help you remember, in case you've forgotten. What was it you were begging me for last night when you clung to me?"

Tomoyuki couldn't believe how easily Aswil could say these things. How inhuman could he be?

His memories of Aswil as a kind man were crumbling around him. He had always thought of Aswil as confident and assertive, but the man he knew never would have forced someone else to submit to him before. Aswil was nothing but an arrogant tyrant now.

"Do you think ...you can actually get inside?" Tomoyuki said, deliberately taking on a brutal tone. He had to put a stop to this. He realized that there was a part of him that wanted to be overwhelmed. No matter how arrogant the man was, Tomoyuki still found him irresistible. He had been forced to face that fact when he

watched Aswil storm into the brothel.

—I'll come back for you. So I want you to wait for me. Years might go by, but my feelings won't change.

Now it was Tomoyuki's turn to dwell on the promise Aswil had made six years ago. He'd accused Aswil of lying, and had been forced to pretend that he'd forgotten about their promise in order to protect himself. The reason he kept resisting now was because he could so easily imagine what he would be like if he allowed himself to be swept away.

Part of him was happy that Aswil was so obsessed with him. On the other hand, Aswil's feelings might cool down. Or he might get tired of him. Or his wives, consumed by their suspicion, would become jealous...

Tomoyuki shuddered. He preferred death to living like that.

"I wonder." Aswil's voice was cold. "I might be satisfied if we sleep together. At least, until we get tired of each other."

At these words, something stretched thin inside Tomoyuki and snapped apart.

He had done his best to protect his sanity, but his dogged tenacity was no match for Aswil's words. The man would harass him for as long as he desired him, then just dispose of him when he got bored. Tomoyuki would be able to do nothing but pray that Aswil lose interest quickly.

He was different from Aswil. The longer they were together, the deeper his wounds would become.

Why couldn't the man have just left him alone? After six years, he had finally felt like he was recovering. Now, in only an instant, he'd been dragged back to the same suffering that had oppressed him before.

"Give me a kiss, Tomoyuki," Aswil ordered, looking down at him.

Tomoyuki saw himself reflected in Aswil's honey-colored eyes, threatening to swallow him whole. But he seemed to be looking at himself from somewhere far away.

He lifted his head from the bed and gave Aswil a light kiss. Aswil lost no time in holding his head and forcing the kiss to become deeper.

Tomoyuki's thoughts evaporated. How easy it would be to turn himself over to Aswil and let nothing concern him.

He was disgusted by the part of himself, tucked away in the corner of his mind, that wanted this.

He heard someone calling his name and he pulled open his heavy eyelids.

Moonlight streamed into the room. Aswil was lifting Tomoyuki in his arms.

"We're leaving," Aswil said. "Get dressed."

Tomoyuki looked at the clock on the night stand and saw that it was nearly one in the morning. Where could they possibly be going this late at night?

He didn't ask. He didn't care. Resistance wouldn't get him anywhere. In the end, he would have to obey Aswil's orders.

When he got out of bed, Aswil—in a great rush—began helping him change. He took off his night clothes in the dark and, once Aswil had finished dressing him in the clothes he'd prepared, Tomoyuki understood. It was an abaya, women's clothing.

"Why do I have to wear this?" he demanded, nonplussed. Even if he had lost the will to fight back, there were still some things he wouldn't accept. "I don't want to."

He started to take off the abaya, but Aswil caught hold of his hand. Aswil's face was grim. "We don't have time for questions. If you're opposed to it, I'll have to ask other people for help."

Aswil was threatening to have other people strip Tomoyuki naked if he didn't behave. He had no choice in the matter.

Rather than resisting, he clamped his mouth shut. If Aswil was just going to ignore everything he said, there was no point in arguing. He obeyed in silence.

Once they'd covered his head with a hijab, hiding everything but his eyes, Aswil hurried out of the room with him. A jeep was waiting for them in the driveway. He was hurried into the back seat and, as he slid into place, the jeep began to pull quietly away. He threw a sidelong glance at the spray from a fountain in the garden, glittering in the light of the headlights as the jeep headed straight for the main gate.

The gatekeeper opened it swiftly. The guards gave one last gesture of respect to the jeep carrying Aswil and Tomoyuki. Nothing more impeded the jeep as

it ran through the midnight desert.

"I'm sure there are things you want to ask," Aswil said once they were out of the palace. "Don't let the driver bother you. He'll never speak about what he sees or hears," he added, offering Tomoyuki this chance to question him without so much as a glance in his direction.

There's a saying in Arabic: "*man saqata salim*" meaning "there is safety in silence." Or, as they say in Japan, "silence is golden." All of the people employed in Aswil's palace, including the driver, had taken "*man saqata salim*" to heart.

Of course there were things Tomoyuki wanted to ask about, like where were they going? And why? But he remained silent. Even if he knew those things, he wouldn't be able to do anything about any of it.

"We're going to Madina," Aswil said, his voice hard.

To Madina.

This unexpected answer only raised more questions. Hadn't Aswil taken Tomoyuki to his palace in Saria so that no one would find out about him? How would Aswil explain things if his family and aides found out about Tomoyuki once they'd reached Madina? On the off chance that Tomoyuki's abduction became public, Aswil would no longer be able to deal with the scandal in private.

He had no idea what Aswil was thinking.

"There's no need to worry," Aswil seemed to read Tomoyuki's reactions without even looking at him. He was still looking straight ahead, smirking. "You've

always been a worrier. As soon as you set one foot outside your room, you think of nothing but how other people are going to react."

Tomoyuki gulped at the way Aswil was smiling and at his tender expression. He didn't want to talk about the past. It was over. He wanted to just shut it away, but he couldn't.

Aswil's eyes narrowed indulgently, and Tomoyuki wondered what he was thinking about. After daring to abduct him and bring him to Saria, the man had been trying to break him with his arrogance. But the Aswil that Tomoyuki saw now was just like the one from six years before.

"Do you remember that fight we had?" Aswil asked suddenly.

Of course Tomoyuki remembered it. It was when one of the other Japanese students had invited him to a speed-dating night he couldn't refuse. It would have been strange if he had. Aswil had laughed and told him he was thinking about it too much and that he didn't need to pretend that he was straight. But Tomoyuki recognized that a homosexual relationship was unnatural. To him, no amount of caution was too much.

He didn't want his relationship with Aswil to ever end. He was willing to pretend that they were just close friends in order to protect it. But Tomoyuki had never imagined that some day he would have to go on a date with a girl from school. But if it had to be done, he would do it.

—*I can't figure out what it is you want.*

And when Aswil got angry at him, he had said

that that, too, was unavoidable.

Aswil had called it a fight, but it wasn't. Tomoyuki had just been shocked at how coldly Aswil had treated him.

In the end, he'd canceled the date. He'd told the girl that there was someone else he liked, and she told him that she'd thought that he had a one-sided crush on her. They were both relieved.

"I don't really remember that time," Tomoyuki said, contradicting the wave of memories that had risen up in his mind.

The smile disappeared from Aswil's face. "You're upset that I brought you here so suddenly, aren't you?" he said.

The shadows cast by the moonlight made something in Aswil's face falter. Tomoyuki thought he saw regret tingeing Aswil's expression and, confused, he looked away. He mastered his feeble feelings and responded with thick sarcasm, "You mean dressed like this? Or do you mean to Madina?"

Aswil quietly answered that he meant both.

"If you know I'm angry, then why are you doing this?" Tomoyuki said. "That's not exactly rational."

He had thought he would never see Aswil again after six years of no word from him. Feeling abandoned, he had told himself that it had just been a lie when Aswil told him he would be back for him, part of the cliché of parting lovers.

This man was the heir to Madina's throne, and he was betrothed to someone. Tomoyuki was sure that he had purposely withheld details about himself when he

was an exchange student so that he could enjoy himself during that brief time of freedom.

But what could Tomoyuki do? If the man he loved was bad for him, all he could do was give him up. He had scorned the part of himself that wanted to believe that Aswil would come back, and he had to argue again and again with the naïve belief that he shouldn't give up.

But despite all of his efforts, the moment Tomoyuki saw Aswil again it had all been for naught. His heart ached so much, even when he had locked Aswil away in the past. His old scars had festered and opened again, his wounds weeping.

"If I'd asked you outright to come to Madina with me, would you have?" Aswil asked softly.

"How can I answer that?" Tomoyuki asked back.

He tried to imagine what he would have done. He probably wouldn't have been conquered by a simple smile from Aswil, whom he hadn't seen in so long. And all these nostalgic feelings wouldn't have overwhelmed him, so he knew he would have rejected the idea.

Apparently, he still hadn't fully dealt with the past.

"You wouldn't have come, would you?" Aswil insisted. "I knew you were holding yourself together. I knew you would be fine without me."

Tomoyuki swallowed his response, marveling at how selfishly Aswil had acted. He hadn't been fine at all. He had just been forced to become fine. But there was no point in saying that.

His emotions faltered, but Tomoyuki pushed

them back as he lashed out, "If you knew all that, why did you do this? What do you want from me? You forced me to come here, and now you're forcing me to dress like a woman. To fulfill some promise you made? Don't be ridiculous. You of all people must realize this is pointless. You must." He hesitated to give voice to the most crucial of his arguments and cut himself off. But he shook his head at that part of himself and, instead, pushed his point. "You're getting married, aren't you?"

He was relieved his voice hadn't shaken when he'd said that.

"Getting married..." Aswil tilted his head and looked at him for the first time since getting in the car. Their eyes locked. Aswil's honey-colored eyes were black now, reflecting the darkness.

Without any change in his expression, he confirmed Tomoyuki's suspicion. "I suppose I have to. I've been engaged for six years. My father wants to see me married while he's still alive, and everyone is pressuring me."

Tomoyuki's heart squeezed tight.

He had been trying to bring himself to accept that Aswil was engaged, but it distressed him to hear it straight from the man himself. And the calm response only made Tomoyuki hate him more.

And this brought him back to his original question. If Aswil was getting married, why had he come for Tomoyuki?

"I see," he said coldly. "I suppose congratulations are still a little premature."

What could he do but laugh and let it go? He

couldn't be expected to have his feelings under control already. He had only just been given the determination to do it, because every time he glimpsed Aswil's face, the six years that had accumulated between them crumbled away.

"I suppose I thought you wouldn't want to come to Madina," Aswil said, no longer looking at him.

"You're right," he agreed. "I didn't want to come."

"So you didn't want to be with me because you'd stopped caring?" Aswil said.

What an insensitive thing to say. Tomoyuki rallied his emotions, which were on the verge of utter collapse. He wouldn't let Aswil know he'd hurt him. If he admitted that, it would just make him look unnecessarily pathetic.

"That doesn't matter anymore. As long as you let me go back to Japan," he said, acting nonchalant.

"It doesn't matter?" Aswil repeated coldly.

"Of course it doesn't," Tomoyuki insisted. "I have my own life to live. Plus, I have a job, you know. How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"So you hate Madina, too?" Aswil said.

A cruel smile came over his face. It recalled in Tomoyuki's mind the memory of Aswil's arrogant expression when he had forced himself on him.

"You don't need to worry about your job," Aswil continued. "We told them that the negotiations were dragging on, so you had to stay a while longer."

"That's not what we're talking about!" Tomoyuki burst out, his irritation flaring. Their conversations

always ran in parallel lines, never intersecting no matter how long it went on.

Aswil turned his attention away, and looked out the window. "We'll be there soon," he said coldly.

Tomoyuki looked out of the window, too, and saw that they had entered a town. There was no one on the streets this early, but the city's lights sparkled vibrantly.

The luxury hotels and shopping mall alongside the gaudy orange street lights made for a brilliant view that seared the eyes. The city deserved its reputation as a world famous tourist site. If Tomoyuki had come here under different circumstances, he was sure he would have enjoyed it.

The jeep sped down an arrow-straight road, sharing it with only a few other cars.

Tomoyuki lowered the window a little, hoping to soothe himself with the fresh air. The night breeze ran through his hair and caressed his face, and his emotions, frayed by the fight with Aswil, began to relax.

"It's beautiful," he said quietly, and Aswil's face softened, too.

"Madina is special, even for a Ridwan Emirates country," Aswil said. "Tourists and VIPs from all over the world come here. We have five star hotels, casinos, the desert, horse races, and falcon hunting. All the pleasures of the world are here, in Madina."

Aswil truly loved his country. But what he loved even more was life in the desert. He had told Tomoyuki that, before. Eyes shining like a child's, he wondered many times about how fantastic it would be to live your life wandering like the ancient nomad tribes of the desert.

Saria might be as close as Aswil had come to seeing his dream granted.

Tomoyuki recalled what the stable hand had told him.

—This is the first time that Prince Aswil has invited a friend to Saria, so everyone is very excited.

But he didn't have to feel bad for Aswil. He shook his head and chased the sympathy from his mind.

"We're here."

The jeep came to a stop. Tomoyuki climbed out of the car and stood before a white wall that ran far off in both directions. He had no way of telling from outside just how big the grounds inside were.

This was the royal palace of Madina. Aswil's father was the current ruler, but some day, Aswil would inherit it all.

They walked the few dozen meters to the gate. The hour being what it was, Tomoyuki grew nervous and sweat gathered in the palms of his hands. Aswil had chosen to bring him here now in order to avoid being seen. The man didn't want anyone to know that Tomoyuki was there.

The automatic gate was big enough for one car, but no one was stationed in front of it.

"Aisha," Aswil called, and an elderly woman in an abaya appeared on the other side of the barely open gate. The tiny woman lowered her eyes respectfully to the prince. She didn't even glance at Tomoyuki.

Aisha motioned Aswil inside the gate. They had obviously planned this meeting.

Tomoyuki noticed a guard on the other side of

the gate standing at attention, and he nervously hunched his shoulders to hide his face. But his caution was unnecessary.

"This person is to be treated with the utmost discretion," Aisha ordered. "Do not speak of this to anyone."

The guard's back grew even more rigid in response, not so much at Aisha's command as at Aswil's presence. Perhaps the old woman had told the guard that the prince would be bringing a woman from an unfavorable background with him.

At last, Tomoyuki understood why he had to wear women's clothing. No matter what the guards might imagine was going on, they wouldn't be able to pry into the business of a woman.

He looked up at the building in front of them. A fretwork doorway arched between two marble columns. The palace enclosed its garden in a U-shape, giving the building an understated beauty. A pond stretched out like a canal from the center of the garden to the palace entrance and every few meters, fountains threw up brilliant arcs of water against the sky.

There must have been 200 meters between the gate and the palace entrance. He hurried after the other two, who were walking at a sharp pace in complete silence.

They slipped inside through an imposing wooden doorway.

A sophisticated collection of sculptures was arrayed along the walls, overshadowed by the jewel-studded ceiling that curved overhead. If the palace

looked this beautiful in the dim obscurity of the night, it must be breathtaking by the light of day. A sigh of admiration escaped Tomoyuki.

"This way," Aisha said, opening a door.

Aswil and Tomoyuki proceeded inside. The room looked like a private salon, and Tomoyuki relaxed. It had conventional Middle Eastern decoration, with a carpet spread on the floor and patterned tiles on the walls. It was nothing like a Japanese room.

"Prince Aswil," Aisha said.

She and Aswil turned to face each other. The two embraced and kissed each other on the cheek.

"I'm sorry to put you to all this trouble without offering any explanation," Aswil said.

The old woman smiled and shook her head. "Not at all. I would gladly give my life to carry out my duties for you."

"Aisha..."

Tomoyuki sensed the deep trust between them. But since Aswil hadn't given him any explanation either, he wasn't sure what he should do. So he simply stood there, waiting.

"This is the one?" Aisha turned her jet-black eyes on him.

"Tomoyuki Makabe," Aswil introduced him. Tomoyuki greeted Aisha, still completely confused. She asked him to remove the niqab covering his face.

He looked to Aswil, who nodded, and so, steeling himself, he obeyed. He concluded from the lack of surprise that Aisha showed at seeing his face that she had already been told that he was a man. He wondered

how Aswil had explained their relationship, but he didn't have the courage to ask.

"I am Aisha, Prince Aswil's nurse."

"Sana is Aisha's daughter," Aswil added.

Now he knew why Aswil trusted Sana so much. She was a loyal servant, of course, but much more importantly, she was Aisha's daughter.

The old nurse must have been like a mother to Aswil, since he had lost his own very early on. Aswil's confidence in Aisha was obvious also in the fact that he was entrusting Tomoyuki to her.

"Is Sana behaving?" Aisha asked, and Aswil nodded emphatically.

"These are the women's quarters of my father's palace," Aswil explained.

Tomoyuki couldn't believe his ears. Aswil himself had admitted that he was asking a lot of Aisha, but this was unbelievable. It was a complete mess.

The old woman gazed at him expressionlessly and he wondered how much she knew about the situation.

"What are you saying? I can't be here!" he cried out.

The women's quarters were the home of the king's wives and children, and the servants who helped them. No man other than the king could even come close to it, let alone go inside.

Tomoyuki had asked before if Aswil intended to put him into his harem, but the man had denied it, saying he had meant it as a joke.

"I have special permission to enter the women's

quarters, so I can tell the king's wives news about his condition and cheer them up while he's gone," Aswil explained further. "We can see each other anytime here, and it's safer than anywhere else."

Tomoyuki found it difficult to believe the things Aswil was telling him so calmly.

"But what about—" he started to protest, but he was so disturbed that he couldn't find the next words.

Aswil gazed at him, looking at him appraisingly. "Saria is no longer safe. That's because it's a special place for me, and I never bring guests there. Zafar knows that, but now he and Kadim both know about you. Word is sure to get out that I invited you there. People will start showing up, hoping to use you."

Aswil's voice echoed deliriously in his head. Even though Tomoyuki heard the words, he couldn't figure out what they could possibly mean. He couldn't take what was said as rational.

"If you just said that you were sheltering a woman who needed your help," he tried to reason out, "I don't think anyone would show up to try anything blatantly, even if there were rumors."

He understood that Saria was special. Aswil had confessed that he wished he could live like the ancient nomad tribes of the desert. Saria, relatively isolated from the rest of Madina, was probably one of the few places where he could feel as if he was touching that dream.

"But really...this?" Tomoyuki asked helplessly.

"No one will be able to get near you in the women's quarters," Aswil answered.

Tomoyuki was positive that the only person

other than Aisha who knew he was there was the guard, and the man wasn't likely to say anything about the woman the prince had brought into the palace.

But the Japanese man couldn't accept this.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just send me home?" he asked.

The question of why Aswil had acted now, after six years apart, still nagged at him. If it was discovered that he'd hidden Tomoyuki in the women's quarters, Aswil would probably be facing quite a dilemma himself.

"I've had enough of this charade," Tomoyuki snapped, taking a step toward the door.

But he couldn't take another because Aswil grabbed his arm and glared at him. "I thought I told you that I wouldn't tolerate your defiance. You will not speak a single word against me."

The blood surged into Tomoyuki's head at the icy command. He couldn't stand it anymore. He tore the hijab from his head and threw it to the floor. "I'm not your wife or your slave!" he yelled.

How selfish could Aswil be? The fact that this man had appeared out of nowhere and bundled him away to Madina by force, and then completely forbidden any questions was proof that Aswil didn't see him as a human being. Even if that was the norm in Madina, as a Japanese citizen, Tomoyuki didn't have to obey him.

"Where are you going?" Aswil asked.

"Let go of me," Tomoyuki screamed. "Who cares where I'm going? I'd rather sleep in the desert than stay here."

"You're being ridiculous," Aswil growled.

His grip loosened and Tomoyuki shook his arm free.

"Just leave me alone!" the Japanese man yelled.

He was getting worked up, forgetting the fact that Aisha was still there. It was all Aswil's fault. The man was being so arrogant.

But when Aisha imperiously interrupted his tirade, Tomoyuki's words caught in his throat.

"How dare you speak that way!" The old woman glared at Tomoyuki with a stern expression. "You will remember your place and speak to his majesty with more respect. Prince Aswil is worried for you, yet you do nothing but abuse him. Do you expect us to allow such rudeness?"

"I—I—" Tomoyuki stammered.

He felt like he had been slapped. His anger disappeared. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, but his defiant feelings withered in the face of this impassioned denunciation.

"But I was brought here against my will!" he finally managed to say.

Aisha squared her shoulders at his whining. "I see. And what does complaining about that now accomplish? You heard what his majesty said. I don't know the details of your situation, but I can tell you this much—as long as you're in Madina, you'll do things our way. Your selfish whining won't work here."

Tomoyuki said nothing, though he did wonder which of them was the one being selfish. He had no allies

in Madina. His resistance would accomplish nothing.

"Now, sit down. I'll make some coffee," Aisha said, disappearing into the next room.

Aswil sat down on a carved wooden chair with a bitter look on his face and Tomoyuki had no choice but to do the same. A single white flower was set on top of a magnificently embroidered tablecloth. Tomoyuki stared at its petals as he chewed on his lip.

He was torn between the things he wanted to tell Aswil and the things he wanted to ask him, and on deciding which he should do first. He could have just started at the beginning, but he didn't want to talk about the past. And anyway, no matter what he said, he knew he would be worse off than when he started, and so he wound up with a doomed feeling.

Aswil said nothing to Tomoyuki, either.

Aisha returned, accompanied by the scent of coffee. Aswil waited for her to set the cups on the table before addressing her.

"I'm sorry, but could you leave us alone?"

It was impossible to tell what she thought of this request, but she expressed not a word of it. She went silently back to the other room.

The uncomfortable atmosphere returned as soon as she left.

The tension was unbearable. Tomoyuki took a quick breath and then began, not hiding the effort it took to speak.

"I'd like to know why I'm here. It's been six years since I last heard from you. I thought you'd forgotten all about me. I had finally given up."

He was careful to avoid complaining, but a note of blame crept into his voice anyway. He mentally kicked himself.

Aswil hadn't told him anything, but he had to admit that that was understandable. What reason could a man, going home to become king and receive a bride, have for staying in touch with his old lover?

Tomoyuki tried to think the problem out calmly. If it had just been a sexual whim, Aswil didn't have to search him out. If Aswil wanted to reminisce about the good old days, he didn't have to go so far as to kidnap him.

Maybe Aswil wanted to tell him face-to-face that it was over—but all he could say about that idea was that it was patently ridiculous.

"I couldn't..." Aswil cut himself off, a pained expression on his face. Deep wrinkles creased his brow before the next words came out in a grave tone. "I couldn't contact you. The internal affairs of Madina weren't exactly stable these last six years. The absolute ruler fell ill, and I was called back. As the crown prince, I had to take on my father's responsibilities. It was my opportunity to eventually be crowned. But since my mother was English, my relatives started arguing that I wasn't fit to be the next king. There were several other contenders—Zafar, who's the second in line for the throne, his brother Rashid, and many others. On the surface, Madina was just as prosperous a country as ever, but behind closed doors, it was broken into tense factions. What do you think would have happened if I'd contacted you then?"

Tomoyuki was silent.

If someone had questioned Aswil's relationship with Tomoyuki, Aswil might have lost his claim to the position of crown prince. It would become a huge scandal, and the Japanese man's peaceful life probably would have been disrupted, too.

"So the story that you were going to get married soon was just a tactic?" Tomoyuki asked.

He had seen Aswil's fiancée, Samira Ali, on the news. The media had spoken of her as the next queen of Madina. That was six years ago, right after Aswil had returned home. Samira had been 13 at that time, but she had obviously been a bright, beautiful young girl. She must be an amazing woman now that she was 19.

"I don't understand why you need to dredge up the past," he added.

Aswil's history with him was nothing more than a stain on his reputation. It hadn't caused him any trouble before because he hadn't contacted Tomoyuki then.

Aswil forced a smile that got no further than his lips. Tomoyuki's stomach turned at the sight of the twisted smile.

"I promised I would come back for you," Aswil replied.

How often had Tomoyuki heard this?

"Not that again." He ran a hand through his hair, trying to look especially ambivalent. "I'd forgotten all about that promise myself. It's too late."

Aswil's smile changed into one of self-derision.

Tomoyuki's breath caught at the sight of it. He wanted to put an end to all this, to insist that he

was finished with the past. But seeing Aswil again had made him keenly aware that he was lying to himself. It was only through his resistance that he had managed to preserve his self-control.

"I would have accepted it if you had gotten married and made a life for yourself," Aswil said suddenly. "I would have been happy for you if you'd had a family. But you were alone. You hadn't even had a lover in six years."

There was no use asking how Aswil knew that. Tomoyuki was upset enough just by knowing that the man knew so much about the last six years of his life.

"So you felt sorry for me?" he asked quickly, cutting Aswil off. He was afraid to hear everything that the man was going to say, so he tossed out a quick conclusion before Aswil could. "Or did you think that I was alone because of you? If so, you thought wrong."

How could he have had a lover? He had been unconsciously comparing everyone he met to Aswil, and they had all seemed so tedious after this man.

Aswil was confident and assertive, unsatisfied if he couldn't make every situation black and white. Even his eccentricities were charming. The memories Tomoyuki had made with Aswil were still precious to him. It was only one short year, but he had learned more from Aswil than he ever had from anyone else.

"All right," Aswil admitted. "It's my fault that you're acting this way."

Tomoyuki's heart began to throb. His old wounds were weeping blood. He would do anything that Aswil wanted of him. The words even crept into his throat.

"You mean because you dressed me in women's clothes and stuck me in the women's quarters of your father's palace?"

He knew it was pointless. He could let his emotions lead him as long as they were just talking. But what then? If he kept acting impulsively, he would be the one to regret it, not Aswil.

"I still haven't decided what I should do, or what I'd like to do," Aswil said. "So I can't let you go yet." He lowered his eyes.

The shadows obscuring Aswil's eyes, which were usually held high with a heroic power, threw Tomoyuki's heart into turmoil.

"You should marry your fiancée and let me go back to Japan," he said, keeping careful watch over his emotions so that nothing would complicate things further and cause his voice to waver. He didn't let even a hint of his pain show on his face. That was the benefit of six years of suffering.

"Is that what you want?" Aswil's sharp eyes fell on him.

"Of course it is." Tomoyuki let a smile play across his lips, never faltering.

What else could he say, for his sake or for Aswil's? He repeated this over and over again in his mind to hold back the swirling cascade of emotions.

Aswil stood up silently.

"I need time," he said brusquely, leaving Tomoyuki with something very different than what he had hoped to hear.

"What does that mean?" Tomoyuki asked.



Without looking at him, the other man walked toward the door. He refused to turn around even after Tomoyuki called out to him.

"What it means..." Aswil told him in an unwavering voice just before he opened the door, "is that I still love you."

An electric shock ran from Tomoyuki's heart to the tips of his fingers. Not from joy, but from surprise.

This was the cruelest thing Aswil could have possibly said. It was bad enough for Tomoyuki when he had kept the flame of their romance burning secretly inside himself. But now that he knew Aswil felt the same, he felt as if he could no longer hate the man or attack him. Who could he blame now? He had used the hatred he felt at being betrayed to rebuild his life.

Even if they did love each other, Tomoyuki didn't want the other man to call it that. He didn't want to be with Aswil.

Aswil left the room and closed the door.

Tomoyuki bit his lip and threw himself down on the table.

"Why...why would he say that?" he cried out. "What does that accomplish...telling me that?"

The string of his nerves, which had so far been stretched to its limit, had been snapped in half by Aswil's confession. The emotions he had been fighting back flowed up and he thought he might scream from the intensity of them.

His body was being torn apart by two warring emotions—the feeling of longing to be at Aswil's side and the feeling of self-control telling him to get

away from the man.

The devastating emotions welling up inside him made it impossible for him to move for a long time.

Chapter Three

Tomoyuki's life in the women's quarters began.

He usually never left the room he had been assigned to and never saw anyone but Aisha, who served him.

He never had the chance to hear what the other women thought of the story that a mysterious woman had appeared one night and been shut up in one of the rooms. He suspected that they didn't think of him fondly.

Aswil came to see him often. He would always drop by the room after visiting his father's wives. There was no doubt that the prince was treating Tomoyuki as equal to, or even more important than, his fiancée, Samira. If she resented him for it, that was only to be expected. He could tell that even Aisha found his presence unpleasant, though of course, she never said so.

But he couldn't do anything about that, either. The old nurse no doubt saw the Japanese man as nothing but trouble for Aswil, she loved the prince more dearly than anyone. Tomoyuki was therefore amazed when Aisha shared with him the information that Samira was in the women's quarters.

Samira was a distant relative of the current queen, wife of Aswil's father King Murshid. She had

decided to come to the women's quarters herself to cheer up the queen, who tended to hide her great concern for the long-suffering king.

Tomoyuki wasn't enjoying his stay any more than anyone else. Locked away, alone in his bizarre life, he choked on all the free time that he could only spend patiently waiting for Aswil to come. He wanted to expose himself as a man and flee the women's quarters at once.

"It's a shame. Lady Samira is such a lovely girl," Aisha muttered with a sigh as she helped Tomoyuki get dressed. She couldn't help but make at least some small complaint about having to hide a foreigner here—and a man, at that—against her better judgment. And because she adored her prince, she didn't mistreat Tomoyuki.

The abaya he wore to meet Aswil was stunning, made of white silk and decorated with a spray of spangles. The collar and sleeves were lined with pearls. It was wasted on a man like Tomoyuki. It was obvious that Aisha, too, would have preferred helping Samira into this beautiful clothing instead of him.

The old woman had originally worked as a lady's attendant. Tomoyuki felt guilty for the things she was made to do now to help him avoid the notice of others.

The hour of Aswil's visit was near. Sometimes, the man would come to Tomoyuki's room, and sometimes, he would summon him to the king's chamber. He did this because the king's chamber was not only separate from the women's quarters, but no one could even approach it without permission from the king.

When he was called there, Tomoyuki was forced to dress in a woman's hijab and cover his face with a niqab.

He knew that Aisha's complaint was not directed at him, that she was just talking to herself, but he had to say something.

"The wedding ceremony is soon, isn't it? I'm sure everything will go splendidly."

He'd heard that the date was nearing—it would be in just two weeks. The old woman probably felt all the more put-out because it was so close.

"What do you intend to do afterwards?" she asked.

He struggled to find an answer to her retort.

"Will you go back to Japan?" she added.

The more she asked, the more he struggled to speak. What would he do after Aswil and Samira were married? Aswil would be the one to decide that. If Tomoyuki could go home just by asking to, he wouldn't be here now.

"If I'm allowed to go back, yes," he said finally. But he was thinking of something else entirely.

—Give me time.

What had Aswil meant by that? Much as he tried not to think about it, the words echoed in his ears. *Because I still love you.* He had played these words over and over again so many times in his mind that he realized he was thinking of nothing but Aswil. His entire body was filled with Aswil. The man's obsession with him troubled his heart. He thought of Aswil's passionate gaze, unchanged from that of the past.

But no matter what Aswil said, Tomoyuki had no future here. The man couldn't keep him in the women's quarters forever, and being with Tomoyuki would damage his reputation, so what was the point?

In the end, there was only one reason that Tomoyuki couldn't accept Aswil—he wanted Aswil all to himself. If they couldn't live together and someone else was about to come between them, it was best to just leave each other.

He would be able to bear being alone as long as Aswil was far away. But he could almost convince himself that going somewhere easy to reach and allowing himself to be found might work, too.

That was how much he wanted Aswil.

He loved Aswil deeply. The man himself probably couldn't even imagine how passionately Tomoyuki felt for him. That was why he couldn't afford to stay in Madina.

"Prince Aswil has always been a single-minded person. Once he's fixed his sights on something, nothing else exists." The corners of Aisha's eyes crinkled. "When his mother died, he was only eight years old, but even so, he didn't cry. The other wives told him, 'She's watching over you in heaven, you shouldn't cry.' They had already caused his mother a great deal of suffering because she was foreign-born, so the prince must have taken their advice to heart."

That sounded like Aswil. He had been raised in an environment where he couldn't even cry over his mother's death. Tomoyuki couldn't imagine how harsh Aswil's childhood must have been. But that's what it

meant to be born into the royal family. Moreover, Aswil was a pariah with a foreign mother. He must have felt incredibly isolated, and learned to guard his emotions fiercely, in order to not show any weaknesses.

Tears threatening to fall from his eyes made his throat tighten, and he put a hand to his chest. He felt pain like this whenever he thought about Aswil.

The bold Aswil he knew had been forced to be that way to meet his family's expectations, without anyone's help, all on his own.

There was a knock on the door.

"His majesty is waiting," a serving woman said.

Aisha looked at her guest. "Shall we go?"

Tomoyuki set out for the king's chamber, where Aswil awaited him. The king's chamber was his father's private residence, and under normal circumstances, even the prince wouldn't have been allowed access to it.

But King Murshid had granted Aswil permission. The king no doubt wished that all his possessions be passed on to his son. It probably also helped to silence the relatives who hounded him, questioning Aswil's legitimacy.

Walking down the main corridor of the women's quarters, Tomoyuki heard someone call out to him from behind and he paused.

When he turned around, he saw a slender young woman standing in the hall. She had abundant black hair and beautiful, smooth skin. Her bright ebony eyes highlighted an expression rich with confidence.

"Lady Samira."

Tomoyuki knew who it was even before Aisha had addressed her. A tremble ran through him.

"You're the one Aswil brought here," Samira declared. "I've been wanting to meet you."

Her black eyes pierced through him, and Tomoyuki lowered his gaze. She thought he was a woman. Imagining how she must've felt, he lacked the courage to look her in the eye.

She turned a contemptuous look on him. "Aswil seems quite taken with you. It's so shameless, when we haven't even had our wedding yet."

Her words cut into him like knives.

"It's such a vulgar way to behave in the women's quarters of the king's palace," she went on. "I can't believe him."

No matter how she berated Aswil, Tomoyuki couldn't utter a word in his defense. He gritted his teeth behind closed lips and bore her anger as best as he could. In fact, there was no one in Madina who welcomed him.

The young woman took a step closer. "Show me your face, girl. I'll remember it forever. I have a right to know the face of the woman who's taken advantage of my future husband."

Tomoyuki shrunk back. If she saw his face, it would all be over.

"My lady..." Aisha hissed. She could not allow this to go on, but the young woman silenced her with a gesture.

Samira was also a haughty member of the royal family. She was not the sort of woman to suffer



humiliation in silence at the hands of a lower-class woman.

Tomoyuki drew back silently, but Samira advanced on him. Her eyes burned with her determination to not let him pass until she had seen his face.

How could he get away? If she tried to pull off his niqab, he couldn't fight back. He couldn't stop her from revealing his face. His pulse thundered with the speed of a hunted animal. He couldn't escape her by retreating one step at a time, but he had no idea what else to do.

"Samira!"

He felt such relief at hearing Aswil's voice that he staggered on his feet.

Aswil advanced quickly and placed himself between Tomoyuki and Samira. "If you have something to say, take it up with me," he snapped.

Tomoyuki couldn't see Aswil's expression, since the man's back was to him, but he could easily imagine it. Aswil had given him nothing but reproving looks since bringing him here. Even when he smiled, there was always something bitter in it.

But Tomoyuki was the same, unable to drop his guard when he smiled.

"No." Samira shook her head. "I have nothing to say. This is just the first time I've experienced such humiliation."

She turned on her heel and stormed off, an obstinate expression on her face.

Aisha was pale, unsure if she should follow her or not.

"Aisha, please talk to her," Aswil requested.

Her face contorted at his order. "Prince Aswil! How can you treat her majesty so badly? I hope you come to your senses soon."

Aisha went after Samira, her face filled with misery, but she had had her say.

Aswil and Tomoyuki were left alone.

"Looks like Aisha hates you, too," Tomoyuki commented.

Aswil looked indescribably tired. Despite how much he had hurt the people around him and how much he was hurting himself, he would not give the Japanese man up. Tomoyuki understood why Aswil had become so stubborn, but he also knew that he should never return Aswil's feelings.

"Let's go." Aswil turned toward the king's chamber and Tomoyuki followed silently after him.

The king's chamber was even more luxurious than the women's quarters. While the decorations of the walls were typical, the octagon-shaped ceiling was worked with delicate arabesque carvings. The sunlight that poured in through a decorative window fell on the marble mosaic at their feet to create a unified work of art. The ornamentation on the canopied bed was the same as the walls, except for the shining gems delicately cut and arranged like the stars in the night sky.

Tomoyuki couldn't keep his eyes off of Aswil when he stood in the king's chambers. He looked like a sheik escaped from an Arabian tale.

Even though they had met every day since he'd been brought to the women's quarters a week ago, he

still wasn't used to seeing Aswil here. His heart fluttered every single time. At the same time, he realized that he belonged to a distant world.

Aswil turned to face Tomoyuki, and his eyes narrowed. He advanced toward him, stopping less than an arm's length from him. "Has anything unusual happened?" he asked.

"...Nothing in particular," Tomoyuki replied.

"Good."

Aswil seized the remaining distance between them. He held Tomoyuki in both arms and pressed his lips to Tomoyuki's temple. His lips slid slowly down and he sighed against the skin of Tomoyuki's throat.

A bud of heat sprouted at the base of Tomoyuki's neck and ran all the way to his heart. His pulse began to quicken. He was sure Aswil could feel it, pressed so tightly against him. He shifted, pulling his body away slightly.

"You still refuse me?" Aswil frowned slightly, but he gave no further rebuke than that. Instead, he embraced Tomoyuki tightly and began to kiss him.

Aswil sought Tomoyuki out, clinging to him as if in supplication. He seemed to be the one struggling, searching for release, and Tomoyuki feverishly grabbed the front of his thawb.

"I can't believe I'm doing this in the king's chamber...I'm not the king," Aswil murmured with a tone of self-condemnation.

"Aswil..." Tomoyuki's voice cracked slightly as he whispered the name.

It wasn't just guilt that he felt. He felt anxious,

he felt self-loathing, and still he felt a desire for Aswil. His emotions were all jumbled together.

"Heaven will judge us one of these days," Aswil said somberly.

His words could have been taken as part of a light conversation. Tomoyuki didn't know how to respond. Maybe he was supposed to tell Aswil not to do this.

"Aswil...I..."

As Tomoyuki hesitated, searching for the right words, Aswil began sucking on his upper lip. "That's enough," Aswil growled.

Maybe Aswil had understood what Tomoyuki had meant to say. He quieted him with a word and tightened his arms around him.

"You're the most beautiful creature in the world...my faridat," Aswil whispered in a honeyed voice as he traced his tongue along Tomoyuki's lips.

He knew this was wrong, but Tomoyuki's body and heart both trembled with pleasure. He felt dizzy.

The kisses were renewed. Tomoyuki felt his legs giving way as the kisses grew more and more intense. A haze settled over his mind, but his body only glowed warmer. He was pulled along in the wake of Aswil's passion for him.

For Tomoyuki, the time passed as if in a dream.

When Tomoyuki awoke, the room was dark. He saw Aswil standing in a slanting shaft of moonlight streaming in through a large window in the shape of a

half-moon. The moonlight washed over his naked body, making it shimmer. To Tomoyuki, he looked like a king blessed by the gods.

Aswil turned to look at him. "You're awake."

Tomoyuki sat up in the bed, gazing back at Aswil.

"No one but the king is allowed in here, but we've slept in his bed," Aswil confessed. "I will surely be punished."

Tomoyuki would share Aswil's punishment then. No, perhaps Tomoyuki's crime was even greater. He had acted like he didn't want to do it, but in his heart, he had hungered for more.

"How do you think God will punish us?" Aswil asked.

He came closer, languidly running a hand through his lover's hair. He wrapped his arm around Tomoyuki's shoulders as he sat on the bed and drew the Japanese man toward him.

"I guess we won't be reborn as human beings in our next life," Tomoyuki replied.

Aswil broke into a smile at the cavalier tone. "And what would we be instead?"

"You could be a horse and maybe, I would be a bird," was the reply.

Aswil chuckled. "If you were a bird, you could fly off into the sky and I wouldn't be able to catch you."

Tomoyuki tried to laugh with him, but the truth was there was nothing funny about it.

It might be better that way, he thought abstractedly. If everything was going to just end up the

same all over again, it would be better not to get mixed up with each other in the first place.

Aswil lay down on the bed, still holding Tomoyuki.

"We've already committed our sins," he said. "If I were a devoted citizen of Madina, I would have labored all my life for the country. But I've never been a true citizen of this country. I've always felt out of place, like a foreigner."

Tomoyuki glimpsed Aswil's solitude in the serenity of his voice.

The man was part of the royal family, but the only one who had inherited foreign blood. No one could fathom his isolation. How had he managed to bury his grief when his mother died so early, while he was still a child? Had anyone helped him?

The room grew silent again, so silent that they could hear each other breathing. The stillness of the night gave the illusion that no one but Aswil and Tomoyuki existed in the entire world. Just the two of them in the king's chambers, shrouded by the night.

Twinkling in the moonlight, the jewels of the king's canopy became stars in the night sky. For the first time since coming to Madina, Tomoyuki felt strangely at peace, despite his guilt.

"I'm proud of Madina and I love it," Aswil continued. "But that's not the same as feeling like I belong here."

His voice was peaceful, too. Straining to hear the rhythmic beat of Aswil's heart, feeling the man's fingers gently stroking his hair, Tomoyuki earnestly

prayed that they could disappear somewhere and stay like this forever. Somewhere where no one would bother them. Just the two of them.

"You should have told me you were royalty—that you were the crown prince," Tomoyuki admonished. "If you had..."

"You wouldn't have fallen in love with me," Aswil said with such a gentle mist in his eyes that Tomoyuki couldn't say anything more.

Of course it didn't matter if Aswil was royalty or not. Honestly, his position still wasn't the least bit important to Tomoyuki. The most important thing was that Aswil be Aswil.

"What a horrible thing to say," Tomoyuki remarked. Frowning, he shook his head and turned away.

Aswil drew him back. "Horrible? Maybe it is. Maybe I am. After all, I shut you up in here after I carried you off."

"To a place like this," Tomoyuki concluded.

Feeling the warmth of Aswil's body behind him, he wanted to cry. He wanted to curse God for making things this difficult. What had he ever done to deserve this suffering?

"A place like this? You used to talk all the time about how much you wanted to see Madina." Aswil gave a small laugh against the back of Tomoyuki's neck.

"That was six years ago," Tomoyuki said, concentrating on the feeling of Aswil's hand stroking his hair. He wanted to remember this, the feel of these hands, even if the man never touched his hair again.

"You don't want to live here, do you?"

Aswil tossed the question out casually, but Tomoyuki didn't hesitate with his answer.

"No, I don't."

Aswil's hand stopped. He was probably disappointed by the answer.

"You didn't think about it at all," he accused softly.

"There's nothing to think about," was the equally soft reply.

If thinking did any good, Tomoyuki would gladly agonize over the question forever. But it didn't accomplish anything. Aswil would become king, he would marry Samira, and he would produce a successor. He would carry out his duty as the king of Madina. His personal feelings didn't matter.

"I suppose I knew you were going to say that," Aswil said.

He pulled his body away from Tomoyuki.

A cold breeze blew across the Japanese man's body. "Let me go back to Japan," he pleaded, swallowing the impulses rising up inside him, which were making him feel miserable.

Aswil stood up from the bed and turned away. "It's an honor to be born into the royal family," he whispered.

Aswil had a muscular back that traced a supple line. Tomoyuki remembered clearly the feel of this man's skin when it was dry and smooth, and also when it was slick with sweat.

But Tomoyuki couldn't touch him.

Aswil's shoulders shook slightly. "But there's no freedom within it," he said even more quietly.

Tomoyuki bit his lip at the vulnerability in those words. If he didn't hold himself back, he knew that he would throw his arms around the man standing in front of him.

But why couldn't they just throw everything away? Why couldn't they run off somewhere far away, together?

Because he knew it wouldn't work. Tomoyuki was too much of a coward, and too ordinary to be capable of something like that.

Chapter Four

The next day, Aisha told Tomoyuki that Samira was going back to her parents' house. He assumed that the decision was related to what had happened the night before, but it turned out that she had been planning to go for a while.

"She'll be staying for a week," the old woman explained. "It's her father's birthday."

It had been a year since Samira had last been home.

Then Aisha said a name Tomoyuki never expected to hear from her mouth.

"The entire family will be gathering there. Last year, Lord Zafar was abroad, so he couldn't attend, but this year he has said that he'll come."

"Zafar?" he echoed.

This was the first time that Tomoyuki had heard of Zafar and Samira being cousins. Unlike Aswil and Zafar, Zafar and Samira were not related by blood. It was nearly impossible for Tomoyuki to understand the family structures in Madina society, since it allowed a man to take up to four wives.

—If you run into any trouble, feel free to come by. I might be able to help you.

He remembered what Zafar had told him when

they'd last seen each other. He was Aswil's cousin, second in line for the throne. If there was anyone in this country who could send Tomoyuki back to Japan other than Aswil, it would be Zafar.

Zafar seemed to frequent the Ziyad brothel, and to have some connection with Kadim, who ran it. But it had been thanks to Zafar's presence that Tomoyuki had been spared. Even Aswil had acknowledged Zafar's role.

Zafar would be a good bet...

Tomoyuki felt desperate enough to grab at any opportunity he could find.

"Would you ask Samira if I could accompany her?" he said to Aisha.

It was a harmless request. But if Samira did allow it, Tomoyuki could leave the women's quarters. Neither Samira, betrothed to Aswil, nor Zafar of the royal family, could welcome the idea of Tomoyuki staying in Madina indefinitely.

If he explained the situation to Samira and told her that he wanted to go back to Japan, she would probably help him. His confidence in this fact motivated him to ask Aisha, though he knew it was risky.

"I would never break a promise to Prince Aswil!" the old nurse exclaimed, not wanting to go along with the request. Even though she found Tomoyuki's presence there offensive, she wasn't going to be easy to convince, thanks to her promise with Aswil.

"I don't want to trouble you. I'll just tie you up and force my way out," Tomoyuki warned.

"...That doesn't scare me," Aisha retorted.

She resisted for a long time, but in the end, she agreed to help. She was just going to act as if she didn't know what Tomoyuki was planning.

"If I go back to Japan, Aswil will snap out of this delusion," Tomoyuki said desperately.

This was the argument that seemed to settle the matter for her. Aisha popped out of the room and when she came back, Samira was with her.

The young woman let out a small shriek when she saw Tomoyuki. She was shocked that a man was in the women's quarters, and a little scared.

"What...is going on here? Who is this man?" she asked, hiding behind Aisha.

Aisha's mouth turned down sadly. "I apologize. Please forgive me for my part in this."

The old woman didn't try to explain. All she could do was apologize again and again, tears forming a thin cloud in her eyes. This seemed to communicate everything to Samira.

"You were a man the whole time?" Samira said in wonder.

As a member of the royal family, she wouldn't allow herself to carry on excessively. When her surprise had dissipated, she grew curious instead. She left Aisha's side and drew closer to Tomoyuki. Perhaps she had decided that there was no longer any reason to fight Aswil's mistress, since he was a foreign man.

"What do you want with me, then?" she asked.

"I have a request."

And Tomoyuki explained why he had to go back to Japan, and that he needed Zafar's help to do it.

"Zafar?" Samira's face was unreadable. Her eyes probed his. "Why him?"

"I believe that Zafar can tell me how to get back to Japan," he replied.

He knew he was putting too much hope in Zafar, whom he'd only met once. But he couldn't think of any other option, so he didn't have much choice.

What would become of him if he continued on like this in the women's quarters? He struggled to imagine an outcome that would be even slightly positive, but nothing suggested itself. If his trysts with Aswil continued in this isolated, barren place, the future would offer him nothing but oblivion. Their relationship could not continue. He was just counting the days until its demise, so it was better to kill it now, by his own hand.

"You mean you've met Zafar?" Samira asked, her face tense.

"Yes. Once." There was no need to tell her that it had been at the Ziyad brothel. "He told me that if I needed help, I should come see him."

The young woman blinked her long eyelashes and took a small breath. "Did he look well?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Samira didn't seem to notice it herself, but when she said Zafar's name there was a hint of apprehension in her voice. Was there a history between them? Maybe Tomoyuki shouldn't have asked her to help after all.

But he didn't feel he could ask further about it, so he simply awaited her answer.

It didn't take her long to decide. "All right," she said. "You'll take the place of one of my attendants. You're a master of cross-dressing by now, I would imagine."

Shame welled up in him. The reason for Samira's hatred was obvious. He could do nothing but accept her insult.

"Thank you for your help," he whispered.

"Don't get the wrong idea," the young woman replied. "I'm not doing this for you. I could just refuse, but I don't hate you, either. I don't know you well enough for that. I'm helping you because sending you back to your country is in our best interests, too. You probably don't know why that is. But you don't understand Madina, or its people."

"Samira..." Tomoyuki faltered.

She was a strong woman, and motivated by justice. She was well-suited for Aswil. The people of Madina would surely embrace her as their queen. She would be better for Aswil.

Tomoyuki nodded silently.

They began preparations immediately. Aisha dressed him in maid's clothes and put a thin layer of makeup on his face. He didn't look like a man, but he didn't look much like a woman, either. But if they didn't act with confidence, their plan would never work anyway.

The old woman took him to Samira's room. He'd heard that she was going home for a week, but there were more bags outside her room than he could imagine using in a month.

He mingled with the large group of maids waiting for Samira. None of the women paid him the least attention, either because he was with Aisha or because they simply took him for a new maid.

At last, Samira appeared and headed toward the entrance of the women's quarters. Her maids trailed after her, carrying the bags.

There seemed to be ranks among the women, according to their birth or the amount of trust Samira placed in them. The maid walking beside her wasn't carrying any bags at all. Samira called her Leila. It was her job to pass their lady's orders on to the other women.

They packed the bags into a limousine and two attendants got in with Samira—one was Leila. The other was Tomoyuki.

Aisha and the other women staying behind at the palace stood in the driveway as the limousine slowly pulled away.

It would take about an hour to get to Samira's house.

Tomoyuki was paralyzed by anxiety. He couldn't even focus on looking at the beautiful city of Madina to pass the time.

They passed through the gate to Samira's family estate and drove slowly through the front garden. A fountain gurgled in the center of a path paved with stone blocks, and date palms were planted on either side. The estate was well-appointed, as befitted the royal family.

They went into the house walking past 10 maids, who stood lined up in front of the house to greet

Samira. Inside, Tomoyuki marveled at the high ceiling curving over the staircase and the Arabian luxury of the walls. And although the furniture was flamboyant, it still looked dignified.

An elderly maid came forward.

"Welcome home, my lady," she said.

"Thank you, Sari." Samira smiled at her happily.

"Is my father out?"

"Yes, he's gone to a reception for tomorrow's races."

"Busy as always!"

The women of the house brought in her bags. She went to the living room with her two attendants, Tomoyuki and Leila. It was a spacious room with a high ceiling.

"Lord Zafar is waiting in the drawing room," Sari said, startling Tomoyuki. Samira must have contacted him before leaving the palace.

"You there," Samira commanded Tomoyuki, "go explain Aswil's business for me."

Tomoyuki made her a respectful gesture and followed a maid into the room where Zafar waited.

Zafar was sitting on the sofa smoking a cigar, dressed in a white thawb. Reclining on a cushion decorated with Arabian embroidery, he smiled as Tomoyuki entered and stood up.

"I'm honored that you contacted me," Zafar took Tomoyuki's right hand and, looking in his eyes, he kissed the back of the hand. "This abaya goes well with your ivory skin. But I could give you even nicer things than this."

It was just like at the brothel—Tomoyuki wasn't sure how much of what Zafar said was serious and how much was a joke. In any case, he saw little need to hide his identity. He took off his hijab.

"I've come to ask for your help, Zafar," he said without further ado. "You did say you would help me if I was in trouble, didn't you?"

Zafar spread his hands wide, nodding. "Did you get tired of Aswil? If you're looking for someone new, I'm always available."

Tomoyuki interrupted him, having no time to spare for Zafar's sense of humor. "I need your assistance. I want you to get me back to Japan."

Zafar shrugged at this request. He went back to the sofa and put his cigar to his lips, then re-lit it with a languid gesture. "Why? Don't you want to stay in Madina? It's much nicer here than in Japan."

The man's completely indifferent and tactless manner irritated Tomoyuki. He had thought that Zafar would treat this a little more seriously. Zafar was, after all, Aswil's cousin and second in line for the throne of Madina.

"That's not the issue," he snapped. "Please don't be so flippant about this."

Jarred by this naked disgust, Zafar looked at him for the first time. Oh, he'd seen the Japanese man before, but it had been as one would look at an exotic animal, with no desire whatsoever to interact seriously.

"It wasn't meant as a joke," he said carefully. "You should just let him put you in a cage, pretty bird. This is Aswil we're talking about. I'm sure he would

even give you a separate house of your own, if you wanted. He isn't the sort of man to give something up halfway once he's made up his mind to have it."

"You can't be serious," Tomoyuki cried out, annoyed.

"Aswil's serious, at least," Zafar retorted.

The way the man threw Aswil's name around caused a sharp pain to shoot through Tomoyuki, as if something was piercing his heart. It didn't matter if Aswil was serious or not. All that mattered was the reality staring them in the face.

"Or are you saying you don't want to be with Aswil anymore?"

Zafar's question came to him wreathed in smoke.

"No, I don't," he answered coldly. "I want to go home as soon as possible."

Zafar searched Tomoyuki's face, not taking his eyes off him. "So your passion has cooled," he finally said.

Tomoyuki couldn't answer. He knew better than anyone how little his feelings had changed.

If he was away from Aswil, his longing might grow stronger. That was what made Aswil desire him now even more than before, and made it impossible for him to resist Aswil. But that was all the more reason to get away as soon as he could. The longer he stayed with Aswil, the harder it would be to leave him.

"What passion?" he asked.

"There had never been any" was what he wanted Zafar to believe. He pulled a smile across his lips. He

tried hard not to look too self-pitying.

But he was no longer sure that what he felt was love. Shouldn't love be warmer, more peaceful? He didn't think he had ever felt peaceful toward Aswil.

When he'd first met him, he had felt lust like a raging fever. He had never imagined that such a fiercely sweet emotion could exist inside him until that moment.

"In 10 days, the marriage and coronation will take place. This will be the biggest event in Madina in the last six years. And the entire world is watching. So it's too late. The responsibility borne by a king is very different from that of a prince, and so is the amount of attention he has to weather," Zafar told Tomoyuki calmly, as if he needed to explain the situation for him.

There was pity on the man's face, and Tomoyuki turned his eyes to the purple smoke curling up from the man's cigar.

If he tried to speak, it would just be more painful. He knew that they just had to hurry.

"If you're prepared," Zafar said, breaking off into a sigh. "Prepared to never see each other again in this life, I'll send you back to Japan. It would be a lot of work, but I'm confident that my name will get the job done."

To never see each other again in this life—Zafar's words stung him. He had always known that if he went back to Japan, he would probably never see Aswil again. But hearing someone else say it made the reality hang heavily over him.

To never again see Aswil, whose warmth and

breath he still felt on his skin—just imagining it made his fingers go cold.

To live once again as he had the last six years: unable to forget, though he wanted to; unable to cry, though he wanted to; pushing away the longing he felt inside him. He would do all that, and then spend his time acting like he had moved on. Closing off his memories, one by one.

It was agonizing work. It broke his heart just to think about those times, and now he had to do it all over again.

"Well?" Zafar prodded.

Tomoyuki forced a deep breath past the knot in his throat. It was all right. He was doing the right thing. If he floundered now, his regrets would destroy him. He told himself all the things he was supposed to, then nodded.

"I won't see him," he said as firmly as he could. "Ever again."

"All right," Zafar nodded and stood up from the sofa. He rested a hand on Tomoyuki's shoulder and forced a smile. "In the meantime, you'll come to accept the reality of that."

"Zafar..."

"Because you have to," Zafar said, gazing past him into the empty air.

Tomoyuki looked at him, feeling strangely uncomfortable.

Zafar and Aswil were nothing alike, despite the fact that they were cousins. Zafar had black hair and black eyes, the features typical of a Middle Eastern man.

Being next in line to the throne after Aswil, Tomoyuki knew that Zafar must have suffered in a way no one else could understand. His position in the world wouldn't satisfy anyone, even if he was blessed by wealth and status.

There was a hesitant knock at the door.

Tomoyuki turned his eyes from Zafar to the door behind him. Zafar walked over to open it and a maid appeared, looking troubled and apologetic.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt," she said. "But... Prince Aswil is here."

"Aswil?" Zafar glanced at Tomoyuki.

Tomoyuki panicked at the sound of Aswil's name. His heart was not yet steeled for the future without Aswil.

But how could Aswil have found out so quickly? No, he couldn't have found out yet. He must have come for some other reason.

"What does he want?" Zafar asked.

"He says he wants to see you, Lord Zafar," the maid replied.

"Me?" Zafar stroked his chin thoughtfully. His hesitation was only to be expected. How could Aswil have known that he would be at Samira's house? Aisha was the only reason Tomoyuki could come up with. If Aswil demanded to know something from her, she wouldn't have been able to keep anything hidden.

Zafar let his hand fall from his chin. "I'll see Aswil in here."

The maid left to pass on the message.

Aswil was coming to this room? Tomoyuki

was beside himself with nervousness, his eyes darting around the room for a hiding place.

"Calm down," Zafar said. "You can go wait in the next room. Aswil came to see me, although I'm sure *you're* the reason for that."

Apparently, he also believed that Tomoyuki's ruse had already been exposed.

Tomoyuki went to hide in the other room. He wondered what Aswil could want with his cousin. He stifled his breath, hyper-aware of even his smallest movements, and pressed his ear against the door.

The door to the drawing room opened and he heard someone come in. It was Aswil.

"Well, hello there, cousin," Zafar said pleasantly. "I haven't seen you since you dropped by the Ziyad brothel. I suppose I should start calling you King Aswil."

Tomoyuki heard Zafar's voice clearly. He could imagine him spreading his arms theatrically. The man always spoke to Aswil with a hidden meaning. He always put himself down and thus highlighted the difference between them, the first in line to the throne and the second.

"Zafar." It was Aswil. The quiet tension in his voice told Tomoyuki that he was holding his emotions in check. "Please don't waste our time with such nonsense."

Zafar responded to Aswil's severity in his usual tone. "Of course. I, too, prefer to be brief. So what can I do for you? It must be quite urgent if you went to all the trouble of tracking me down here."

Aswil bristled at Zafar's coyness. Tomoyuki could feel it through the door.

"Will you turn Tomoyuki over to me?" Aswil asked, cutting straight to the heart of the matter.

Tomoyuki trembled in surprise. He had expected this to happen. But knowing that Aswil had come all that way to find him threw his emotions into chaos.

He was also aggravated at being caught so soon after his escape. He dug his fingernails into his palms.

"Well, this is sudden." Zafar sounded more than a little surprised and gave a short laugh.

"You know why I'm here," Aswil snapped, "and you will stop interfering in my affairs. I don't know why you would risk it in the first place."

"It's not very nice of you to imply all these horrible things about me," Zafar retorted.

Aswil sounded annoyed. His voice never broke into a rage, but he was obviously incensed. His anger was revealed by the fact that he had come all the way to Samira's home.

"I'm taking Tomoyuki home now," he growled. "Will you produce him?"

He probably hadn't punished Aisha. He didn't want to make the women resent Tomoyuki.

"Aswil..."

Aswil interrupted Zafar before the man could continue. "I didn't come here to talk to you. Just give Tomoyuki back and we'll be done."

This was a grand example of the saying "to turn a deaf ear to someone." Aswil wouldn't give his cousin any opportunity to explain himself. He would only

stubbornly insist that Zafar hand Tomoyuki over. Maybe he didn't need an explanation.

Even if his mother was a foreigner, there was no question that Aswil was the man who would become the next king of Madina. His genes and his upbringing allowed him to issue orders, even to his cousin, as a matter of course.

"I'm a busy man, Zafar," he added.

Tomoyuki pressed himself against the door and listened attentively, not wanting to miss a word. He also wanted to get an idea of what Aswil was really thinking.

"I suppose that's true," Zafar answered evasively. "I'm sure you're also too busy to concern yourself with other people's feelings."

His words were clearly meant to provoke.

"Thank you for your timely opinion," Aswil snapped. He wouldn't let Zafar get under his skin. He had scorned his cousin from the very beginning, trying to break him down. "I can have my men search the entire building. But I don't think you want that."

"Aswil, are you even listening to yourself?"

"Yes. I know exactly what I'm doing."

Aswil's voice sounded desperate enough that he would really search the entire house. He was furious that Tomoyuki had fled the women's quarters.

"Aswil, you have to—"

Zafar's words were interrupted by a sharp sound.

Tomoyuki had flung open the door to the side room, throwing caution to the wind.

Aswil looked at Tomoyuki and his eyes narrowed. Tomoyuki knew Aswil was mad, but just for a moment, the man's expression showed the relief and tender emotions that were welling up inside him. Just seeing him standing there like an Arabian lion, his honey-colored eyes and skin framed by a white thawb, Tomoyuki's pulse quickened.

As Aswil strode toward him, Zafar moved between them.

"Leave him alone," Zafar said.

"Move. This doesn't concern you," Aswil warned softly.

Even standing behind him, Tomoyuki could sense Zafar's annoyance and the way he was frowning at Aswil.

Zafar refused to back down, either. "I can't do that. As your cousin and childhood friend, I can't just ignore how irresponsible you're being."

"You're just worried about Samira, aren't you, Zafar?" Aswil sneered. His face, as sculpted as a doll's, made him look even more cruel.

"Whatever it takes." Zafar fixed his eyes, as black as shadows, on Aswil.

Tomoyuki looked at the two of them, staring each other down, and found his resolve. Or rather, he renewed the strength of his resolve. He couldn't let Aswil behave this outrageously. Aswil couldn't just force his way into other people's houses to chase after a man.

"I'm not going back there. I'd rather kill myself right now than go back," he said emphatically.

A muscle in Aswil's jaw twitched. He stared at

Tomoyuki, his enormous passion trembling in his eyes. "How ludicrous..." he began, but Tomoyuki cut him off.

"I'm serious!"

Tomoyuki thought he might cry. He fought back the urge and glared at Aswil. It was tragic that he had to reject the man that he loved so much.

"Cousin," Zafar murmured. He glanced back at Tomoyuki, then turned his eyes on Aswil. His voice grew stronger, demanding, "Have you ever considered Tomoyuki's feelings?"

Aswil's expression instantly became icy. Even his skin started to look blue. Tomoyuki turned his eyes away. Whenever he looked at Aswil, he wanted to run to Aswil's side, to embrace him and make the same mistakes all over again.

But then everything he'd done to get here would have been for nothing.

Zafar kept pressing his attack. "I feel sorry for Tomoyuki. You must know that there will be no peace for him here in Madina. You, the cool-headed and self-assured Aswil al-Murshid, have taken this man to your side without even considering what that will do to him. The public would jump all over Tomoyuki. It's not like you to get so carried away with your emotions that you don't think of something so obvious."

Aswil was silent. He had probably never in his life been told off by someone else, and he had no response. He pressed his lips together, deep wrinkles creasing his forehead.

Tomoyuki decided to break in, unable to see him

like this. He didn't want to watch Aswil be degraded by Zafar.

"Zafar, that's—"

But Zafar went on. He hurled his frank opinions at Aswil, ignoring the Japanese man's attempt to restrain him. "I'm sure you realize that if anyone were to find out that Tomoyuki was here, you would have to send him away. He has no alliances with anyone here. As long as Tomoyuki stays, his presence in Madina will offend everyone."

Maybe Zafar wasn't actually doing this to protect Tomoyuki, but rather to protect Aswil. He didn't really know very much about Tomoyuki, after all.

Aswil didn't move or say anything.

Zafar drew closer to his cousin and laid his hands on Aswil's shoulders, as if amazed that the prince still didn't understand after all that was said to him. "You can't lock him away for the rest of his life. His spirit would crumble under the pressure. You do realize that, don't you?"

Aswil stared straight ahead, not responding to the harsh criticism. Zafar shook him, completely fed up.

Finally, Aswil opened his mouth heavily.

"Did Tomoyuki come to ask you for help to get back to Japan?" he asked.

Zafar nodded urgently. "That's right. He thought I might be able to do something. He was desperate. I want to help him."

Aswil never once looked at Tomoyuki. He probably considered Tomoyuki's flight from the



women's quarters and his reliance on Zafar as a double betrayal.

"As one of your countrymen, I beg you," Zafar continued. "You will be the next king, and I want you to choose right now—him, or your fiancée Samira?"

Even Tomoyuki thought Zafar's ultimatum was audacious. He swallowed and watched Aswil.

Aswil maintained his silence, showing no emotion. But it was clear he wasn't deliberating about who to choose.

"This should be simple," Zafar said, pressing for an answer.

And Aswil's lips were finally loosened.

"I suppose it is," he said curtly. Life returned to his face and the same old spark was in his eyes again. He had made his decision.

He turned his back on Tomoyuki. That was his answer.

"To show my appreciation, why don't I let Tomoyuki stay at my house until the wedding and coronation?" Zafar asked. "I think that would be best for you, too, Aswil."

That was so Aswil could face reality. Certainly, if he was confronted with the reality of their separation, he would have to deal with it.

Aswil left the room without another word. Tomoyuki stood staring blankly after him. Aswil had left without him, without ever looking back at him. Aswil was showing that he didn't need Tomoyuki anymore, now that he'd made his decision.

If Tomoyuki wanted Zafar's help, he could stay

with Zafar. And if he wanted to go back to Japan, he could go back. Tomoyuki could practically hear Aswil's voice telling him these things.

What a disappointing conclusion.

It was the result he thought he wanted, but when it actually came to pass, he was too shocked for words. He knew that he shouldn't be hurt, but the pain in his heart was real.

Zafar came up to Tomoyuki, still staring, unmoving, at the door Aswil had disappeared through. Pressing his fingers against his temple, Zafar let out a sigh. "It's done."

He had said that as if he expected Tomoyuki to be happy, and so Tomoyuki tried to answer with a smile, but his cheeks only twitched. He didn't understand it himself. He should have been glad that his wish was finally granted.

"Let's go to my house," Zafar suggested. "You can't stay dressed as a maid forever."

"Thank you...you've done so much for me." Tomoyuki said the words mechanically, his mouth making the motions of politeness. All he could see was Aswil's back.

It was done, just like Zafar had said. Aswil would never cling to Tomoyuki again. There probably wouldn't even be a chance to see each other again. Nothing held them together anymore.

"Don't mention it. I'm making myself your ally by doing this." Zafar gave a slight smile. It made Tomoyuki think there were certain kinds of suffering and sorrow that only the royal family had access to.

But Tomoyuki had his hands full right now just managing his own feelings; he didn't have the energy to worry about Zafar's, too.

"I already gave Leila the orders," Zafar continued. "You're in no condition to see the other maids, so we'll pretend you went back early. Shall we go?"

They left Samira's house and headed for Zafar's. Zafar told him it would take an hour by car to get there.

It seemed like so long ago that he had woken up in the oasis of the Saria palace, but it hadn't really been that long at all. So much had happened, but nothing had changed. Tomoyuki had been alone before being reunited with Aswil, and now he was alone again.

"You won't need to dress like a woman in my house. Of course, if you want to, feel free. I'm the only one who lives there, so don't restrain yourself on my account."

Zafar's suggestion was a welcome one. The man was probably going to make sure that Tomoyuki didn't get too depressed. But Tomoyuki was far too exhausted to thank him properly. He could only look at him gratefully.

"You're not married?" Tomoyuki asked.

He knew nothing about Zafar, aside from the fact that he was Aswil and Samira's cousin, and second in line for the throne. He didn't even know how old Zafar was.

"My younger brother is married and he's already given the family its grandchildren, so my parents have mostly given up on me. Sooner or later I'll probably give

up the fight, but for now, I'm enjoying my bachelorhood too much."

"I see..."

If only Aswil had had brothers, his position would have been different. If he weren't in line for the throne... Tomoyuki mentally kicked himself for wasting his time with these fantasies. There wasn't much point in avoiding the reality anymore. Aswil would be married in two weeks and be king. But he couldn't help fantasizing a little.

Zafar's house was on the outskirts of Madina.

The grounds were amazing. It was near the desert, with a view of the horizon. There were no tourists there like those in the center of the city, but it was close to a market so the environment was still full of energy.

Tomoyuki had noticed that the gardens in Madina used water and greenery as their main elements, and Zafar's home was no exception.

The car pulled to a stop on the driveway. Zafar and Tomoyuki got out and a garage door swung open. It was obviously a garage, but it was very different from any Tomoyuki had seen before—there were more than 20 luxury cars inside. He felt as if he was at a car show. Apparently, Zafar was a car enthusiast. And since he was single, everything was his to do with as he pleased.

They entered the house directly from the garage. There was a foyer on the other side of the automatic doors, and an elevator that ran up to the second floor. They went into the living room, and Tomoyuki was blinded by its extravagance. Sofas were lined up one after another, all of the cushions were silk interwoven

with threads of gold. They took a spiral staircase at the back up to the second floor, passing countless doors as they walked down the hall.

"Use whatever room you want," Zafar offered. "You're welcome to come to my room, too."

He winked and Tomoyuki gave a pained smile.

"Thank you. Here is fine."

He pointed to a door that looked promising. When Zafar opened the door, he saw a comfortable-looking room that far surpassed what he'd had in Saria.

"The bedroom is next door," Zafar said.

"Thank you so much. This is..." Tomoyuki trailed off.

Zafar squinted sardonically at him. "It's a little early to be thanking me. You're going to regret giving up Aswil."

"It's a little late for that," Tomoyuki said softly.

He had plenty of regrets already, and they would probably never go away. But he would have regretted accepting Aswil's rule, too. He didn't know which was better. He probably wouldn't know for a long time.

"Feel free to use anything you find in here. I won't mind. Also..." Zafar pushed a button on the room's telephone. There was a knock on the door soon after and an older man appeared. "This is Hayil. If there's anything you need, let him know. He can manage just about anything. That includes when you're hungry. Hayil, this is Tomoyuki, a guest from Japan."

Tomoyuki stood tall and greeted the servant. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He extended his hand and Hayil returned his grip.

"The first thing is clothing," Hayil said practically. "What would you like?"

"Oh..."

Now that he'd mentioned it, Tomoyuki realized that he was still dressed like a woman. Hayil didn't so much as raise an eyebrow at Tomoyuki's scarlet face. He took a placid step closer. "Allow me."

Tomoyuki nodded, and Hayil looked him over quickly, then left the room. He must have been taking in Tomoyuki's measurements.

"Hayil can get a pretty good fit just by looking at you," Zafar shrugged. "But he looked so sly, I think he was imagining what you look like naked."

Hayil soon returned with a change of clothes in hand. Tomoyuki thanked him and accepted the men's shirt and slacks he'd brought.

"Once you've changed, would you like to have a look around?" Zafar asked.

Tomoyuki wasn't sure how to respond to the invitation. He didn't feel much like sightseeing.

"Thank you, but I don't think I will," he finally answered.

Zafar clucked his tongue. "You'll just get depressed if you stay shut up inside. You should breathe the air outside. Madina is such a beautiful city, but I'll bet you haven't seen any of it yet."

Zafar was right. Going outside might cheer him up a little. Tomoyuki changed his answer the second time, accepting the invitation gratefully. "Thank you, then."

"Of course. Would you like to eat something

first? Hayil, is lunch ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Hayil left the room with a respectful gesture and Zafar sat down on an easy chair against the wall.

"I'd like to change," Tomoyuki said.

Despite the obvious implication that he wanted to be alone, all Zafar did was give a breezy "go ahead." Tomoyuki remembered that the bedroom was connected to this room and he thought about going into the next room to change, but decided not to. It wouldn't bother him if Zafar saw him change.

He dropped the women's abaya and pulled on the pants and shirt. He felt more relaxed just being in men's clothes again and his mood improved.

Zafar glanced up at him. "Can I ask you something?"

Tomoyuki agreed, steeling himself for the worst—which came immediately after Zafar's frank question: "Are you gay?"

The man couldn't have asked Tomoyuki something more impolite if he had tried. And to ask that after watching him change clothes...what could he say except that Zafar was a candid man?

It caught Tomoyuki off-guard.

"Did it embarrass you to watch me change?" he asked evenly.

Zafar nodded. "Aren't you even a little bit conscious of men watching you?"

"Unfortunately, I've never in my entire life been aware of men looking at me," Tomoyuki answered.

—*With one exception, that is.*

When honey-colored eyes were on him, his heart raced painfully fast.

"Then why were you with Aswil?" Zafar asked.

This question stopped Tomoyuki short. Why had he been attracted to Aswil if he wasn't gay? He was deeply troubled by the question and he didn't find an answer.

He had wanted to clear the air when he'd confessed to Aswil, and he had been prepared for a hopeless battle. But amazingly, his gamble had paid off. He hadn't thought Aswil would accept him, so he had felt incredible when Aswil had returned his feelings. And everything that happened after had just been more and more incredible. "Floating on cloud nine" was the only way to describe what it had been like back then.

"You know what Aswil is like," Zafar said. "He was freed, if only for a moment, from the strict customs and heavy responsibility of the court. It's not all that remarkable that he would have some romantic adventures while he was studying abroad. And as long as no one was going to find out, it was probably less hassle to be with men. A woman could come back to haunt him later."

Tomoyuki finally understood what Zafar was trying to say. The man thought that Tomoyuki had seduced Aswil.

Certainly, he had been the one to confess his feelings. He couldn't deny that. But his feelings had been more of longing. He'd liked Aswil so much that he wanted to get to know him better, but he hadn't thought of anything past that.

But in any case, Aswil's sex appeal was the reason that they'd begun a physical relationship. Aswil knew exactly how charming he could be, and he had imprisoned Tomoyuki with flirtatious little acts and glances.

—If I invited you into my bed, what would you do?

Aswil had gazed at him with smoldering eyes and Tomoyuki had taken his outstretched hand, as if a spell had been cast over him.

If only he hadn't confessed his feelings, or he hadn't taken Aswil's hand...But no matter how much he regretted the past, there wasn't anything he could do about it now.

"Oh God." Zafar's mouth twisted and he shook his head. He rubbed his temples and gave an unrestrained sigh. "If I'd known you were going to get a look like that on your face, I wouldn't have asked."

Tomoyuki gave Zafar a wry smile. The man looked so embarrassed.

"It's all over now. More importantly, I'm a little hungry." He wheedled Zafar with a purposely carefree tone. He didn't want to continue discussing this.

"Oh, that's right."

They left Tomoyuki's room and walked to the dining room. A chandelier of pure gold was hanging in the elegant, spacious room and a magnificent rosewood table sat in its center.

A procession of sumptuous food was brought in for their "lunch." There was a soup with many different varieties of beans in it, a tomato and olive salad,

sautéed lamb, oven-roasted chicken and vegetables. An abundance of fruits had also been prepared for them.

"Is there something in particular you'd like to see?" Zafar asked, referring to the sight-seeing after their meal.

"Maybe the market," Tomoyuki suggested after some thought.

"Done. Anything else? The race track, a casino, the bars?" The corners of Zafar's mouth were hiked up in a grin. "You've already taken the desert tour."

Tomoyuki glowered at the joke. He didn't like being reminded about how he had foolishly run out into the desert by himself and wound up at the brothel.

He paused. He was thinking about Aswil. His jet black hair, the way his honey-colored eyes crinkled when he laughed, his gaze, his long fingers....The Aswil he saw in his mind was not the Aswil of six years ago, but the Aswil of today. When his thawb streamed out behind him, he was beautiful—more striking, more manly than anyone else.

A ripple ran through Tomoyuki's body as he thought of Aswil. He couldn't rein in his emotions. They were becoming more and more unruly as he began to realize that it was all over. The wonderful food turned to dust in his mouth. He felt bad for putting Zafar to such trouble.

When they finished eating, they went sight-seeing as promised. Tomoyuki had lost all desire to go out by that point, and the presence of the driver and guards oppressed him even more. But he couldn't back out now, and so he silently climbed into the back seat.

"Madina is a truly beautiful country," Zafar said. "The tourists enjoy the luxury of the hotels and casinos, and then the next day, they can become desert nomads. And we're one of the world's leading oil producers. Did you know that? Only the royal family is allowed to own oil fields in Madina. No matter how much they try, no one can get their hands on the oil if they're not part of the royal family."

As he listened to Zafar, Tomoyuki squinted against the hot breeze caressing his cheek. It would have been wonderful to visit this country as a tourist.

Evidence of Madina's wealth was everywhere. Of course the tourist spots were well-kept. But a glance showed that money flowed freely, too, in the closed quarters where people spent their lives, in the hospitals and welfare buildings, and the housing areas. There was no sign of squalor anywhere, and the abundance of low, white buildings hinted that the people were reluctant to spoil the scenery. The date palms that carpeted the city were also well cared for.

Madina was exceptional, even among the United Ridwan nations. Everything related to education and welfare was completely free, something other countries found difficult to emulate.

This was Aswil's country. He was born and raised in this beautiful land.

Tomoyuki saw Aswil's image—smoldering, unforgettable—whenever he closed his eyes. Once he left Madina, he would never be able to come back, so he wanted to engrave the image in his memory now.

Their jeep crossed into the desert.

Inside the jeep, shrouded by the clouds of dust it kicked up, Tomoyuki tilted his head at Zafar curiously. "I thought we were going to the market."

The man was sitting in the back seat of the jeep, his long legs crossed, looking out of the window at the road ahead. "We are. This will be your second trip, won't it?"

"My second trip?"

He suddenly realized that Zafar was going to Ziyard.

"Why are you doing this?" He stared into Zafar's disinterested face and got a lighthearted smile in return.

"Despite how easy you are to kidnap, I don't have any ulterior motives. You saw the beauty of Madina. Now I want to show you the dark corners of my blessed country."

Tomoyuki didn't understand what Zafar was hoping to accomplish. He had nothing but horrible memories of Ziyard, but he knew if he asked to go somewhere else he would only be ignored.

Now the window stood between him and the city he had seen only a few short days before. They were in Ziyard, a shadowy crevice hidden in the desert.

This town was home to the brothels and lay, to use Zafar's words, "within Madina's borders, but isolated from it." Ziyard was far removed from the sparkling image people had of Madina. The citizens of Madina probably preferred that other countries not even know the town existed.

The jeep wove expertly through the intricate alleyways. That just proved how often Zafar came to this

place. But why would he come here if he thought it was shady? This place was repulsive. Zafar was a strange man.

A chill ran down Tomoyuki's spine when he caught sight of the brothel. They got out of the car and Zafar walked into the building, an air of long experience in his stride, and Tomoyuki followed after him.

They saw Kadim in the same room as before.

"Well, it's our unexpected guest again," the man greeted.

A strongbox sat on the table. Kadim, who had apparently been counting bills, replaced the box's lid and locked it before he stood up and walked towards them. His sharp eyes were caution itself. He didn't seem to fully trust the fact that Zafar had brought Aswil's guest there.

"No, I'm just giving him the tour," Zafar said.

As Zafar and Kadim embraced, Tomoyuki finally saw clearly that they were holding each other in check.

"There must be better places to take him sightseeing," Kadim grumbled.

Zafar must have been something of a double-edged sword for Kadim. It was good for business that a member of the royal family patronized his brothel, but on the other hand, Zafar was also a burden. No matter what Kadim did, he had to be aware of Zafar's watchful eyes.

"Really? I think this is one of Madina's landmarks," Zafar said casually, ignoring Kadim's stress.

Kadim had no response to that.

A cheer erupted from somewhere off to their left.

"Is that a show?" Zafar asked.

Kadim nodded, his face cracking into a thin smile. "In other circumstances, our guest might have been on stage by now."

Tomoyuki recoiled from Kadim's sly smile. He couldn't begin to understand how a prosperous country like Madina could allow a place like Ziyad to exist.

Zafar gave a dry laugh. "You shouldn't joke about that. Aswil wouldn't find it very funny. Or do you plan to start picking fights with Sheik Aswil?"

He threw Kadim a warning look with his sharp, penetrating eyes.

"Don't be ridiculous." Kadim shook his head. "I wouldn't dream of contradicting his majesty. I just thought I'd hazard a little joke with you, since you've been so generous in your patronage."

The room was filled with an uneasy atmosphere, as if this exact exchange had occurred many times before.

Kadim nodded politely, then picked up the safe and went to the door. "Make yourselves at home. But if you'll excuse me..."

Tomoyuki regarded the door Kadim had gone through uneasily.

"Do you want to see the show?" Zafar inquired.

Tomoyuki rejected the invitation immediately.

"No! That's horrible."

He wasn't going to humor Zafar. Kadim had revealed the true horror of the brothel.

—Once I get him in my brothel, he'll be dead to the world. No one will ever be able to find him again.

A shudder of disgust ran down his spine at the memory.

He'd always heard that Madina's education and welfare systems were equal for everybody. But what went on in Ziyard seemed to contradict that.

"Yes, you would look down on that, wouldn't you?" Zafar said. "This place gives Aswil the most headaches of the entire country. Ziyard is what's known as an extraterritorial region."

"He can't control things here?" Tomoyuki asked.

The king of Madina had absolute power. As the king's successor, Tomoyuki thought that Aswil could shut the brothel down.

"You saw the market, didn't you?" Zafar's eyes clouded over. "The people of Ziyard survive thanks to favors from the brothel. It's been that way for hundreds of years. I've also heard people say that long ago, Ziyard used to rule Madina. It's not easy to control Ziyard, since Madina has never managed to conquer it."

He spoke without emotion—Ziyard wasn't a sensitive topic anymore. That was a sign of how long-standing the problem of Ziyard really was.

"Aswil used to come here often, once," Zafar revealed. "If people had found out that the heir to the throne was visiting the Ziyard brothels, it wouldn't have done him any favors politically, but he came anyway."

"And so now you come in his place?" Tomoyuki asked. "But you're royalty, too, aren't you?"

"It's much less of a problem for everyone else. Aswil and I are worlds apart, as far as our responsibility to the public goes."

Tomoyuki felt like he could tell where this was leading. Maybe that was why Zafar had brought him here.

Zafar added, "Aswil is an important man, not only for Madina, but for the Ridwan nations as well. He's the only one eligible to become king who won't turn his eyes away from the darkness in Madina."

A bigger cheer than ever rumbled outside. There wasn't the slightest twinge of guilt in the audience's voice—just pure excitement. The show must have reached its climax. Tomoyuki could just see Kadim's smirking face.

"You're a great man, aren't you?" Tomoyuki said.

Zafar's face hardened, as if he had taken Tomoyuki's words for sarcasm.

The Japanese man continued. "I really believe that. I mean, you could have just ignored a foreigner like me. You don't owe me anything. Aswil could have taken me back with him, without any problems, but you made sure he gave me up."

Zafar relented a tiny bit. "He didn't have any choice but to give up," he replied briefly. His voice was hard as he stared off into space. It sounded like he was talking to himself.

Tomoyuki looked away. "Can we leave now? This place makes me...uncomfortable."

He left the brothel and walked toward the car

ahead of Zafar. The wind had picked up a cloud of whirling sand. He walked on, looking straight ahead. What else could he do?

Chapter Five

The entire country was alive with the festivities. People tried to tone down their boisterous celebrations of the new king's marriage and coronation out of respect for Madina's current king, who lay on his deathbed. But as the day approached, the uncontrolled exhilaration of the citizens was visible everywhere in the city.

Flags hung from the fronts of hotels and stores; some people were selling home-made souvenirs to commemorate the occasion. With three days to go, Tomoyuki saw banners saying that the day would be a national holiday. Some people were even working to make the date a permanent annual holiday.

News organizations had gathered from local and foreign institutions to capture the moment when Madina's new king would be crowned. The media battle was slowly heating up to white hot intensity, every television station and newspaper offered nothing but stories about the wedding. Naturally, there were tight restrictions in place, and those locations that could be filmed had been designated long beforehand.

The streets of Madina, desert tour groups, and Madina's biggest mosque, where the wedding and coronation would be held, were all open to reporters.

As well as the king's palace, which would be hosting a celebration party afterwards. But no cameras would be allowed at the mosque or the palace on the actual day of the events.

In sharp contrast to the joyous mood of the population, Madina's government was tense. Some tourists were upset that border checks had been made much stricter in anticipation of the rare event.

"It's just going to get worse," Zafar said, a cigar in one hand. He gazed out from his home, shaking his head with fatigue. "By next week, VIPs from every country in the world are going to be in Madina to attend the party. The anti-monarchy groups are marshalling their forces, so we won't be able to just relax and enjoy the celebration."

"This is a golden opportunity for them," Tomoyuki commented. "Even if they only show up in the crime reports, they could make a big impact."

Zafar smiled wanly at him. "What would you do if you were them, Tomoyuki? Would you strike the mosque where the ceremony was being held, or would you prefer the hotel hosting the party afterwards?"

It would have been natural to be insulted by the way Zafar had posed the question, but Tomoyuki gave it serious thought. He found his answer before long.

"If it were me, I would strike the hotels where all the important people are staying, the day after the festivities. Before they have time to recover."

Zafar gazed at him in languid surprise. "How evil."

"Well, they are anti-monarchy groups, after all,"

Tomoyuki retorted.

He had been staying at Zafar's home for the last 10 days, and Madina's must-see event of a lifetime was only three days away. After the marriage at the mosque there would be the coronation, and then Aswil would officially be king.

"I see. And what are the groups' goals? Money? Political power?" Zafar questioned.

"Free trade of the oil fields," Tomoyuki guessed. "It's not right that only the royal family can own them. Unregulated competition is the basis of capitalism."

"That won't work," Zafar said, brushing aside the idea. "Madina's royal family isn't just some symbol. We're the pinnacle of our nation. No one could be allowed to have a higher status than the king."

"It must be difficult for the royal family, too. I can't even imagine," Tomoyuki mused.

If he owned the oil fields then that meant that at times, the king himself had to play bidding games with the world's super powers. He would negotiate abroad with one eye on protecting the interests of his own country. The country may have been rich in resources, but the king needed intelligence, endurance, and great energy to protect it. If he lacked any one of these qualities, he wouldn't be able to serve his purpose.

"There are a lot of groups, some pro-Aswil, some pro-Zafar, and some others," Zafar confessed. "There's a lot of antagonism between them all. But I don't personally hate Aswil. Actually, I feel sorry for him. There are more than a few hard-headed relatives of ours prejudiced against him just because

his mother was a foreigner."

Tomoyuki listened to the story in silence.

"There was a time when King Murshid wasn't sure what to do, either. Aswil has the right to first inheritance, but if he becomes king like this, by Murshid's royal fiat, the opposition will just become more radical. I worry that the government will be split in two. In Madina, no one can force the king to abdicate. King Murshid watched Aswil these last six years and finally decided that he was worthy. That's why Aswil became so cautious."

Tomoyuki understood now why Aswil hadn't contacted him once in all those years. Aswil couldn't have done it no matter how much he might have wanted to—he was afraid Tomoyuki might get caught up in the politics, too. But once he was secure again, Aswil had made his move.

Just to keep his promise that he would come back for Tomoyuki.

"For the last six years, Madina has effectively had no king," Zafar continued. "In three days, that will be over and Madina will get a fresh start with a new king. It's so great."

Tomoyuki gazed at him, sensing a fair amount of sarcasm in his spirited words.

Zafar exhaled some smoke carelessly. "I suppose there are several ways you could take that."

He turned his eyes from Tomoyuki back to the window. He didn't seem to want to continue their discussion, so Tomoyuki left Zafar in silence.

Three days left.

Did he want the day to come quickly, or did he wish instead that it would never come? He couldn't tell.

But whatever Tomoyuki wanted, the day would come.

All he could do was hide and await the day of his final parting from Aswil.

The morning of the wedding came.

It was a special day for Madina. The entire population was on the edge of its seat, awaiting the birth of its new king. Tomoyuki knew it would be a day he would never forget.

He planned to go with Zafar to the mosque where the marriage ceremony would be held. Normally, due to the heightened security, no one other than the royal family and some government officials would even be able to approach the building, let alone set foot inside. But Zafar had pulled some strings and arranged access for Tomoyuki.

But now that the moment had come, Tomoyuki's stomach was churning. He was having trouble staying calm. He had been awake all night thinking, running over the long list of his doubts and regrets. For instance, why hadn't he gone back to Japan on his own? And what was he doing all alone in a place like this?

Only a few hours left.

In a few hours' time, Aswil would be married, and he would be king. He would move out of Tomoyuki's reach forever. The Japanese man had made this decision himself, but there was still a part of him

that faltered, and was miserable.

Suddenly, a call came from Samira, interrupting his thoughts. She wanted to see them immediately. Zafar informed him. There was something she wanted to discuss.

Zafar was worried, wondering what Samira could possibly have to say to them on the day of her wedding, but Tomoyuki had exhausted his supplies of anxiety. Why should anyone worry about Samira, anyway? She was about to celebrate her marriage to Aswil and live out the rest of her life in his arms.

"Let's go, Tomoyuki."

Zafar led Tomoyuki outside. They were going to the mosque two hours ahead of schedule.

"You go by yourself. I'll...wait here."

"Samira asked for you to come, too," Zafar replied, hurrying Tomoyuki along. Apparently, he wanted Tomoyuki to suffer even more. He probably only wanted him to confront the reality of the wedding, but Tomoyuki had had enough of hard realities. He couldn't take any more.

He resisted, though he knew he was whining like a child. "Why should I? I'm Japanese—this is none of my business." He had lost all desire to attend the ceremony at the mosque.

"Get a hold of yourself," Zafar ordered coldly. He was Tomoyuki's ally, but he was also a member of the royal family. He wouldn't concern himself with the Japanese man's delicate feelings for long. "I don't care how sorry you feel for yourself, you're going. That's what Aswil wants."

The mere mention of Aswil's name rendered Tomoyuki speechless. He couldn't believe that Aswil personally wanted him to attend. The man was going to do everything he could to harass him, then.

He lost the energy to resist Aswil's abuse.

"Come on, now. This is the whole reason you stayed in Madina, isn't it? To witness this day." Zafar clapped him on the shoulder as he chided him, and Tomoyuki slowly lifted his lowered eyelashes.

Zafar was right. He had to pull himself together. Whatever else happened today, it would all finally be over. However painful it might be for him, he had to attend the wedding and see Aswil for himself. He had to see the reality of Aswil's new life with his own eyes. If he didn't, the suffering of these last six years would just repeat itself all over again.

Tomoyuki hurried to the mosque with Zafar.

They waited in a side room, away from the reception area for the royal family. Samira appeared almost instantly. She still hadn't dressed in her bridal clothes. Tomoyuki was relieved by Samira's lack of preparations. He was happy enough to delay the sight of her as Aswil's bride.

"I need to talk to you," she said urgently.

What in the world could she want to talk about? As soon as she'd seen them, her face had hardened with an iron determination.

"What's going on?" Zafar asked.

Samira remained distracted. She didn't seem to have heard Zafar's question. But a few moments later, she turned her eyes on Tomoyuki, her jaw tense.

She was ready to talk.

"I have a request," she said.

Tomoyuki was startled by her grave expression. He couldn't imagine what Samira would need from him.

"From me...?" he asked dubiously, and Samira nodded emphatically.

"Yes, from you."

Zafar also looked flabbergasted, frowning uncertainly at Samira. But he didn't interrupt.

"I'm not sure I can help you," Tomoyuki said, trying to buy some time. Samira was pressing him for an answer, but he hadn't even heard the request yet. It pained him to see how serious the young woman was. "What do you need?"

Samira's lips tightened and she let out a long sigh. "I don't want to marry Aswil."

Tomoyuki couldn't process what Samira had said immediately. It was so far beyond what he'd expected to hear, he thought he must have misunderstood.

What had she just said? He thought it over carefully, then finally realized exactly what she'd told him. But he couldn't help her. The wedding ceremony was in three hours. She shouldn't even say something like this as a joke.

He looked quickly over at Zafar, but Zafar's face was forbidding. He seemed to be battling back a flood of powerful emotions.

"I can't marry Aswil. Please..." Samira said again.

This time, her beautiful face looked tortured.

Tomoyuki didn't understand what she wanted. Wasn't this the day Samira had awaited for so many years? But she had never revealed her distress so candidly before.

"Stop acting like a child." A low voice came choking out of Zafar. His anger had set a vein in his temple ticking. "Don't you think it's a little late for cold feet? No one's going to listen to your selfish demands now, when you're about to become the queen."

"I know." Samira appealed to Zafar with her eyes, revealing just how strong the emotions she held inside her heart were. "I assumed that I had to obey King Murshid's decision. Aswil did, too. But we don't. It just got harder and harder, the closer today came. Do we have to go through with such an unhappy wedding? Isn't marriage supposed to be with someone you love?"

"What—" Zafar looked bewildered. His chest heaved with his frantic breaths. "What are you saying? How can you be so naïve when you're going to become the next queen? This marriage isn't for you, it's for your country. That's what it means to be part of the royal family."

His voice betrayed the turbulence within him, undercutting his argument. He himself didn't believe the things he was saying. He may have been right in theory, but that wasn't what mattered.

"Is it a crime for the royal family to seek their own happiness?" Samira asked.

A cynical smile shadowed her face. Zafar's jaw tensed at the sight of such desolation.

"Zafar." Samira turned her tear-stained eyes on

Zafar. "There's someone else that I love. I struggled to abandon those feelings, but they refused to disappear. And yet you still want me to marry Aswil and have his children?"

Zafar's face was a picture of agony. This wasn't the man that Tomoyuki knew. He knew Zafar as a detached man, philosophical towards everything.

It was then that Tomoyuki understood who it was that Samira really loved.

Zafar knew it, too. He must have felt the same way she did.

—He didn't have any choice but to accept it.

Everything in Zafar's heart was laid bare by that single sentence.

"It's too late..." he whispered still trying to reject the idea, but his voice cracked.

It pained Tomoyuki to see how violently the man was struggling to contain his own emotions.

As royalty, Zafar had no choice. He existed for the country and its people. His first priority was to do what was best for the country, not for his own emotions. Aswil, Zafar, and Samira had all been born into Arabian royalty, and the importance of the royal family's role had no doubt been instilled in them since they were children.

But Samira said that she couldn't give up her love. Zafar was struggling with indecision. And Aswil—he had been busying himself with selfish pursuits like kidnapping Tomoyuki, even though he knew how reckless it was.

Maybe Tomoyuki hadn't understood anything



about these people. It must take so much willpower just to live their lives.

He had accused Aswil of being selfish and arrogant, but the man hadn't been acting on ordinary determination. He must have given the matter a great deal of thought and agonized over his eventual decision. The result of that had been to kidnap the Japanese man and bring him to Madina, which seemed so foolish on the surface.

Aswil had said he'd done it to fulfill his promise to Tomoyuki, but that wasn't the only reason. He wanted to love someone for his own sake and secure his own happiness, independent of his obligations as the next king.

Tomoyuki ventured some impertinence. "It's ludicrous to let your parents arrange your marriage in this day and age," he said. "Even if you swallow your feelings and marry Aswil, you're never going to be happy with someone you don't like."

He knew how rude it was for him, as a foreigner, to offer his opinion.

—Isn't marriage supposed to be with someone you love?

No matter what country a person is from, whether they're royalty or peasants, they're all human beings.

"I think you need to tell Aswil right away," he suggested. "I'm sure he'll understand. He'll think of something so that no one gets hurt."

He knew Aswil would put Samira's feelings first, even if it meant putting himself at a disadvantage.

Aswil would worry about Samira's happiness as a human being, even if she was a member of the royal family. Even if he couldn't have what he wanted himself. But no, he would grant Samira her desires precisely *because* his own were denied to him.

"I have a better idea," Samira told Tomoyuki.

"Oh? What's that?"

He realized that they were only now reaching the real reason she had called him there.

"I want you to take my place."

"...Take your place?" he repeated, uncomprehending.

Samira explained in a clear voice, "I want you to marry Aswil in my place to avoid causing an uproar."

Samira had shocked Tomoyuki into silence when she announced that she didn't want to get married. But that had been nothing compared to his reaction now.

"Do...do you know what you're saying? You can't be serious," he shouted, flatly rejecting the idea. And knowing just how serious the young woman was made it all the more impossible to condone her proposal.

"I meant every word," Samira insisted. "If we call off the wedding, they aren't going to just act like nothing's happened and go ahead with Aswil's coronation. We've come this far; now we have to make sure everything continues as planned."

"Maybe, but..."

This was taking things much further than just replacing a maid in order to escape the palace. Not only would he be deceiving the royal family and government officials, but Aswil himself. Tomoyuki

couldn't do it. It was unreasonable.

"I think you should talk to Aswil first," he said.

Samira lowered her eyes sadly at this suggestion. "There's no time."

"Come on..." Tomoyuki pleaded.

What would Aswil think? How would it affect his reputation? This would be effectively stabbing him in the back.

"I'm not going back."

As Samira said this, the door between their room and the reception area opened. Leila came in, carrying the bride's clothes. They were chastely white, the hijab covered in appliques of golden thread. During the coronation ceremony, the crown would be placed over this cloth.

"I can't do this," Tomoyuki said adamantly.

"But didn't you agree that it was outrageous to marry against my will?" Samira asked.

Tomoyuki hesitated. "Yes, but..."

Samira didn't back down. Her decision was final and she would allow no further discussion of the subject.

"Trust me," she said. "Everything will be fine. We have to do what we know is right. Otherwise, we'll only live to regret it."

"Samira..."

Her strength of will amazed him.

Zafar was still completely silent, a grim look frozen on his face. He was out of his depth now, too.

Normally, Tomoyuki would never allow this to proceed. It was no exaggeration to say that this crime was

punishable by death. But if Samira was having second thoughts now, then they would all regret this moment forever after. He had to do what he could today.

Samira's determination overwhelmed Tomoyuki. He couldn't turn her down just because he didn't want to do this. He stood there, unable to move or think of what else he could say. Samira grew impatient and signaled Leila to work.

"Excuse me." Leila's fingers rested on one of the buttons of Tomoyuki's thawb.

"I give up." Zafar let out a long, deep sigh. He was back to his old self. He must have shrugged off his confusion at last. The look of agony had disappeared from his face.

"Zafar..."

Samira gazed at him, her eyes misting. Confronted with an expression like that on the young woman's prideful face, Zafar couldn't help but be moved. He was, after all, the one that she loved. His eyes held a powerful resolve, as well.

"No one has ever been able to stand up against you, Samira," he said finally, with a smile.

Samira was a woman who could change Madina and the royal family. The first step was for her to marry the person she loved.

Tomoyuki renewed his conviction and helped Leila to pull the opulent clothes on.

The clothes swirling around his body were designed in such a way that the difference between his proportions and Samira's was almost invisible. It was all strangely comfortable, and somehow the hem fell to

exactly the right length, almost as if it had been made for him.

The workmanship was so beautiful that it commanded admiration. Countless pearls picked out a rose pattern on the white silk. No other jewels had been used in order to better highlight the necklace, a huge emerald surrounded by pink diamonds.

Even on a man like Tomoyuki, the effect was bewitching.

"It's quite a piece of work." Zafar looked Tomoyuki up and down, as if the Japanese man had become a whole new person. "It looks perfect on you. That's impressive."

Tomoyuki reddened as Zafar let out a laugh. He glared at Zafar and Samira led him to a sofa to sit down. Leila began applying makeup with much greater flair than when he had impersonated the maid.

"Come here."

When everything was finished, they led him to a mirror. Tomoyuki didn't recognize himself. He looked like a completely different person.

"You may be even more beautiful than Samira," Zafar mused.

Samira stared at her beloved. "I hope you don't mean that."

"No, no. Just a joke, of course." Zafar raised both his hands, indicating his surrender to Samira's grumpiness.

Tomoyuki had come this far, but now his fears overtook him again. He shuddered to think that he would have to stand in front of Aswil dressed like this. Maybe the

man wouldn't recognize him if he kept his face covered. Maybe the ceremony would go exactly as planned.

But what about afterwards? What would Aswil do when he found out? Tomoyuki couldn't imagine.

He was committing a horrible crime...

He turned away from the reflection in the mirror and looked back at Samira. "I'm sorry...I can't—"

Before he could finish, Samira cut him off. "If you refuse, I'll be forced to commit suicide right here. Nothing would cause Aswil greater shame than that. If his bride cast him off while the entire world was watching, he wouldn't be able to become king and he would be a laughingstock for the rest of his life."

"I..."

Tomoyuki shook with terror. Whatever else happened, he couldn't let her do that to the man he loved. He was wrapping his arms around himself for reassurance when a knock came at the door. He cringed and quickly pulled the silk niqab across his face. Samira quickly left the room.

The door opened. It was Aswil, in full formal dress.

Tension sprang up in the room the instant he entered. The presence of a king charged the entire atmosphere. Tomoyuki's breath caught at the unexpected sight of Aswil, and he felt as if his knees might give out.

Aswil wore a translucent blue jewel on the breast of his white thawb. Rose designs in gold thread were embroidered at his cuffs, and a short sword studded with 99 diamonds and large jade stones were hanging

at his hip. A magnificently jeweled chain decorated his keffiyeh.

He walked into the room so majestically, accompanied by his guards, that he looked like a king straight out of the movies.

He was so beautiful, so overflowing with grace that Tomoyuki gasped.

"I couldn't wait any longer," Aswil said. "I had to see you. You look wonderful. Even the roses of Madina would wilt beside my bride."

Tomoyuki felt dizzy. He wasn't quite sure if it was because Aswil was standing before him or because his crime was weighing so heavily in his mind. His heart was racing and his entire body shook, straight down to his fingertips.

Zafar caught Tomoyuki's arm as he staggered.

Aswil strode up to them and pulled Tomoyuki away from Zafar.

"You will not be so forward with my bride," he growled.

Aswil stared Zafar down. Zafar removed his hands from Tomoyuki and held them up in surrender.

Tomoyuki panicked. Aswil's arm was wrapped around his shoulders. He could barely breathe. Aswil believed that he was Samira. This knowledge made it even more difficult for him.

"Come." Aswil's eyes fell on Tomoyuki.

The Japanese man couldn't return the look he received from Aswil's mild, honey-colored eyes. He lowered his eyelashes as Aswil placed a kiss on his trembling palm.



Only now did he realize what taking Samira's place would involve. He would have to watch from the closest possible vantage as Aswil declared his love for Samira and took her as his bride.

And once everything was revealed, Aswil would harshly grill Tomoyuki. Tomoyuki would have to try to resign himself to whatever blame he received. If Aswil asked him why no one had consulted him about this little farce, he wouldn't have an answer.

He could say it was for Samira—but no. He knew Aswil would be furious with having to humiliate himself. But even so, he wanted to confess the entire plan.

He was trying to approach the problem logically, but he feared the other man's anger more than anything else. If Aswil ever hated him...he went crazy just thinking about it.

Tomoyuki turned to face Aswil again, ready to tell him everything.

"Asw—"

But Aswil himself stopped him.

"My bride." Aswil smiled at him vibrantly, alive with desire. "Everything will end today, and begin anew. Trust yourself to me."

A pain shot through Tomoyuki's heart at the sweet words whispered into his ear. Everything would indeed end for him today, but there would be no new beginning.

"Let's go."

Aswil pressed his hand against Tomoyuki's back, still unaware that anything was amiss. Tomoyuki

took a trembling step forward. There was nothing else to be done.

Before they left the room, Aswil addressed Zafar without turning around.

"You should watch the ceremony. You might get a little bored, but you are not to leave before it's over."

"Is that the king's order?" Zafar tossed back belligerently.

"Yes," Aswil said flatly.

Zafar fell silent and they left the room.

They were surrounded by guards on either side. Tomoyuki could only follow where Aswil led.

Aswil stopped in front of the room prepared for the bride. "We must part briefly, but...we'll be together again soon."

Aswil looked at Tomoyuki with a radiant expression. He was in raptures for his wedding day. Tomoyuki, on the other hand, thought his heart would shatter.

There was still some time before the ceremony, but he would have nothing to do until then but pass the time being tortured by his regrets.

"See after my bride," Aswil directed Leila, who was standing off to one side. Leila seemed slightly troubled and gave an uneasy bow.

At that moment, completely unconscious of the eyes of his own guards or those stationed outside the bride's room, Aswil gazed passionately at Tomoyuki—no, to him, this was Samira—and bent close to him.

"When you take off your bridal clothes, I pray that you'll be smiling," Aswil whispered.

Tomoyuki bit his lip. If he didn't, he would reveal that he was not Samira.

There was no going back now. All he could do was play the role of the bride to the best of his abilities. And at the same time, he would carve every detail of Aswil into his memory to last forever.

He would never be able to forget Aswil anyway, so he wanted to remember just a little bit more. That way he would have more than just painful memories of his deep love and this moment together.

Chapter Six

The mosque was ancient.

Only the royal family of Madina, high ranking officials, and the royalty invited from other Ridwan emirates were allowed to enter. The marriage ceremony began with solemnity and beauty.

A red carpet threaded its way between the rows of attendees up to the dais. Tomoyuki followed it at Aswil's side.

Light from the sun streamed in through the exquisite stained glass windows in somber, unearthly patterns and Tomoyuki was caught in a fresh wave of fear. Deceiving an entire congregation in a holy place struck him as a dangerous thing to do.

Marble pillars, each five meters in diameter, supported the high domed ceiling over a sea of blue tile. Gentle music made the place seem even more ethereal.

The mufti, the mosque's religious leader, began reading out an entry from the Koran about marriage. The attendants repeated after him, seeking the agreement of the bride and groom to the marriage.

Aswil spoke his words of consent and Tomoyuki imitated him in a low voice.

Aswil exuded majesty. He would make a remarkable king. If only Tomoyuki hadn't come into his

life, God would have blessed him as the perfect king.

Tomoyuki knew he would be punished. He was blaspheming against God. He fought down the urge to unmask himself right there, in the middle of the marriage ceremony.

They moved on to the coronation.

The mufti placed a crown over Aswil's brow and a cheer burst out of the audience like a collective sigh of relief. The mufti then placed a crown on Tomoyuki.

They were led to a pair of thrones and sat down together.

This was the moment of the new king's birth.

A feeling of rejuvenation swelled up inside the mosque. Everything was reborn on that day, at that moment. It was the beginning of a new history in Madina.

Everyone's eyes followed the new king, and they forgot even to breathe.

In the rippling stillness, Aswil quietly stood up.

"With all my heart, I thank you, as Madina's new king," he announced.

His eyes swept over the audience as he voiced his solemn thanks. They watched him hungrily, holding their breath, wondering what this new king would bring them.

Aswil drew out his words. "I will now perform my first act as king. As all of you are aware, there are certain rights exclusive to the king. One of those is the right of abdication—the ability to decide for myself when I will give up the throne."

There was a disturbance in the air. No one

spoke aloud, but a murmur was spreading through the audience. Tomoyuki was as confused as they were. He had no idea what Aswil was doing. The only person here who knew what was going on was Aswil.

The man's imperious voice rang out throughout the mosque. "I hereby declare my abdication. There is one reason only: there is a man better fit to be Madina's king than I."

Tomoyuki wanted to call out to Aswil, but his voice was stuck in his throat. All he could do was search the resolute face he saw before him. There wasn't so much as a flicker of doubt in the man's eyes as he faced the audience.

"Zafar al-Ibrahim!"

Sitting in the front row, Zafar's eyes sprung open. He wasn't the only one surprised. Everyone there found it impossible to believe what was happening.

No questions or arguments came forward. Not a single voice was audible. The room was as silent as a tomb. That was how shocking this announcement had been.

Aswil stepped down from the throne, leaving his crown resting on its cushioned seat. A look told Tomoyuki to do the same. Without being fully aware of what he was doing or why, he removed the crown from his own head.

Aswil stretched his hand out to him. "Come... my faridat."

Tomoyuki's eyes widened at the name.

"Asw..."

"Give me your hand," Aswil said.

He didn't need to be asked twice. Tomoyuki set his trembling hand atop Aswil's, and a heartwarming smile came over the other man's face. He squeezed Tomoyuki's hand tightly in his own. Together, they crossed back over the red carpet with dignified steps.

No one tried to stop them. Everyone simply watched them go by in a daze.

When they were outside, Aswil opened the passenger door of a car, which he had obviously prepared in advance. "Get in," he said.

Tomoyuki looked from Aswil to the car and back, hesitating. What the man had just done had no doubt astonished not only all of Madina, but most of the world as well.

"Aswil, you...you have to go back," he said. "Why are you doing this?"

His mind was in complete chaos. It was unheard of for a king to abdicate immediately after being crowned. This man had to go back right now.

"You want to know why?" Aswil's voice was full of energy. "It's not obvious? I know exactly what's most important to me."

"Aswil..." Tomoyuki blinked his eyes rapidly. He was convinced that he must be dreaming.

"Get in, quickly," Aswil insisted.

He pressed his hand at Tomoyuki's back and Tomoyuki climbed into the passenger's seat, despite his uncertainty.

Aswil shut the door, then got into the driver's seat.

"I learned how to drive after I got back from

England," he explained.

He pressed down on the accelerator. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

As they roared out of the mosque's parking lot, they passed throngs of citizens readying their flags. Everyone's face was radiant, honestly rejoicing in the accession of a new king.

They could never have imagined that their newly crowned king would be making his getaway like this. The populace and the media's attention would be briefly distracted, and then no one would even see Aswil's low-profile car anymore.

No one stopped the car as it came out of the mosque. They left the building far behind, following behind a military escort vehicle. The vehicle leading them had apparently been notified in advance, and it guided them along smoothly.

Once they had put some distance behind them, the military vehicle pulled over to the side of the road. The window rolled down and the driver waved them off with a salute.

Alone now with Aswil, Tomoyuki ran over what had just happened in his mind. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't make sense of the man's actions. There was only one thing he was sure of—he had succeeded in convincing Aswil that he was Samira.

"Aswil, I'm..." he began, but decided that actions would be better than words.

He pulled off the hijab and niqab, then rubbed at his face with both hands, wiping off the makeup. He turned sideways in his seat. "I'm not Samira. I changed

places with her for the ceremony. Samira is in love with Zafar, and...I agreed to take her place out of respect for her feelings."

There, he had confessed. He was ready for the worst. After all, Aswil had just lost his throne, and now he'd also lost his bride.

"I've known about Samira and Zafar for a long time. They make a good couple," Aswil answered evenly, his handsome face undisturbed.

Tomoyuki hadn't expected that. He was disappointed.

Aswil had known for a long time? So he wasn't even surprised. He didn't look the least bit upset by the news.

"Aswil, I'm saying I tricked you," Tomoyuki said. "You married me, thinking that I was Samira."

Aswil frowned, as if he thought that Tomoyuki's explanation was unfair.

"A marriage is meant for people who love each other," he said.

Tomoyuki didn't answer.

"It would have been meaningless without you as my bride," Aswil added.

At the mosque, he had stretched out his hand to Tomoyuki and called him "faridat." He had called Tomoyuki that since they were together in England. At that time, Tomoyuki wasn't sure if Aswil had just been calling out to his bride, or if he had been addressing him. But Aswil's words now dispelled all his doubt.

Aswil had known that it was Tomoyuki the entire time.

"That day when Zafar asked me if I'd ever considered your feelings, I didn't have anything to say for myself," Aswil said. "But at the same time, I realized something. There are people who can take my place as king, but there's no one who can take your place, Tomoyuki."

"Aswil..."

"If you can't live here in Madina, I'll just have to leave, too." Aswil looked confident. This was such an important decision, but he was treating it so frivolously. "Besides, I'm not so stupid that I wouldn't recognize my own bride."

For the first time since they'd been brought back together, Aswil smiled at Tomoyuki just like he had when they were first together—a smile that revealed honest happiness. It seemed that Samira and Aswil had orchestrated the entire thing.

"Aren't you going to say something?" Aswil asked.

Tomoyuki scrunched up his eyebrows as he searched for a response.

"This is awful..." he finally said.

He was referring to Aswil, for throwing away everything just for love. And so was Tomoyuki, since he had done nothing to stop him. Far from it, Tomoyuki was glad that Aswil had.

"Completely awful," he added.

He fought back the tears threatening to break free and took several deep breaths. He needed time to accept that this was real. Otherwise, he would just feel like it was a convenient dream. And if it really turned out

to be a dream, he would never get over it this time.

"Tomoyuki." Aswil slowed the car and pulled to the side of the road. The honey-colored eyes that Tomoyuki loved so much fell on him. "I wouldn't be able to live a day here without you."

He spread his hands out before Tomoyuki. "You won't be angry if I hold you in my arms?"

"Of course not," Tomoyuki replied, wrapping his arms around Aswil's back, squeezing them tight.

"I have nothing now," Aswil said. "I'm no longer a member of the royal family, and no longer have my palace. You must be disgusted to be with such an ordinary man."

But Tomoyuki had never needed any of that. As long as Aswil al-Murshid was with him, that was enough.

"Any women's quarters?" Tomoyuki asked, voice faltering with excitement.

And Aswil laughed softly in his ear. "Of course not. There's only one person I love."

Aswil's arms wrapped around his beloved's body at last. Joy bubbled up inside Tomoyuki, filling him completely. He couldn't hold back his tears any longer. But he ignored them as they rolled down his cheeks.

"What will we do now?" he asked. The answer seemed somehow essential.

"What should we do?" Aswil replied, his voice overflowing with such happiness that it couldn't have sounded any fuller. He kissed Tomoyuki's cheek and murmured in a silken voice, "We can do anything. We're as free as the hawks in the desert. My faridat."



Faridat, the name that he gave to no one else in the world—only to Tomoyuki. The word that existed especially to name the person most precious to him in all the world.

Tomoyuki didn't need anything but this. It was enough to savor the happiness of being in each other's arms.

He gazed at the blue sky he saw over Aswil's shoulder. A pair of desert hawks could fly freely in a sky like that. Stretching their wings wide, at peace, nothing holding them back.

Nothing could stop them from going where they wanted.

Tomoyuki whispered the name of the man more precious to him than any other in the world.

"Aswil."



HEAVEN

Part 2: Heaven

He heard the sound of waves. Sometimes, the voices of children playing carried over to him.

Tomoyuki relaxed in a chair on the dock of their cottage, dozing peacefully below a large parasol. The wind caressed his cheek like a bird's wing, lulling him into still deeper sleep.

These last three months had been like heaven. That was the only thing he could compare them with. His biggest worry was that if it continued, his heart and body would swell beyond their capacity to contain such joy.

"Tomoyuki."

He roused himself slightly, smiling as he heard his name and felt fingers in his hair. "Mm?"

"A storm's coming."

"Oh yeah?"

Opening his eyes, he saw Aswil standing in front of him. The former king of Madina, wearing an Arabian-style tunic and loose-fitting silk pants, had visibly relaxed since coming to this island floating somewhere in the South Pacific. He was nearly his old self, the Aswil that Tomoyuki had known in England.

"Oh, I see it," Tomoyuki uttered.

The sky had been a clear blue up till then, but distant thunder now accompanied the clouds that had

spread across the sky. Turning his eyes from the sky back to Aswil, Tomoyuki noticed something in his hand.

"Is that a letter? Who is it from?" he asked.

"Aisha," was the reply.

"...May I?"

Aswil nodded as he handed the letter to him. Tomoyuki unfolded the paper and began to read the formal Arabic script.

There he read the events of the last month. They had expected a fair amount of fuss, but they had been surprised at how hard it had been for Aisha to accept what had happened.

Tomoyuki felt a nagging guilt as he read the letter. After Aswil's dramatic renunciation of the throne at his coronation, they had gone straight to the airport. They had touched down on this tiny island in the South Pacific. He had been surprised to find out that Aswil owned the island of 300 or so inhabitants, and that the man came here once a year to disappear from the world.

"Aisha is the only one who knows about this place," Aswil had confessed.

And just as he'd said, no one seemed to realize that Aswil owned the island and, for better or worse, no one came to visit them. The media also left them in peace. So Aswil was only reported on as much as he wanted to be and he generally laughed it off.

—*There's a word for this in Japanese, isn't there? People will only talk about you for so many days, or something?*

—*Seventy-five days.*

—*That's right.*

Maybe Aswil was naturally disposed toward such broadmindedness. Tomoyuki knew that once the man had made up his mind, he never again questioned his decision—recent events had demonstrated that aspect of his personality, too.

Aisha wrote about the various rumors that were circulating: that Aswil was deathly ill, that he'd had a dispute with the rest of the royal family, that his British mother had been persecuted by Arabian society and so he actually hated the royal family. But most interesting of all were the newspaper stories questioning his disappearance with special editions that read like a detective novel. He'd gone back to his mother's native country. Or maybe since he was so strangely fond of Japan, he'd gone there. Some country or other must have given him amnesty. And so on, and so on.

His 75 days were over, but people hadn't forgotten about him yet.

But it was probably just a matter of time. Soon they would be crowning a new king. Aisha's letter also mentioned that Zafar and Samira had been married. She said that they fought from time to time, but seemed truly happy together.

The two had postponed their honeymoon, but apparently they had gone together to Ziyad soon after the wedding. Samira had declared that she wanted to see with her own eyes this place that her husband went to so often.

—*It would be hard to destroy Ziyad. All we can do for now is open it up as much as possible to the outside world.*